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CREATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE RING AND THE BOOK

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CREATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE RING AND THE BOOK

CHAPTER I

"DO YOU SEE THIS RING?"

1.

For Robert Browning, it was not a question of man's being essentially rational or irrational. There was no one word or series of words which properly he could use to explain how he felt about the "pure crude facts" of human existence. At least, no words taken at their denotative value would serve. He consciously searched for a poetic method which would enable him to render his multi-lateral and often perplexing view of life into a new reality. To Browning, creating a new reality was both symbolic and real--symbolic in the sense that he achieved it through one of the imitative arts; real in the sense that poetry itself is real, a living and growing part of human experience for the reader.

The purpose of this dissertation is to describe Browning's growing concept of the creative consciousness which he believed lay in the capabilities of each of us. Browning believed that the individual, as Professor E.D.H. Johnson pointed out,

> engenders truths on the world, that he does so by rebelliously asserting his will in opposition to the evil which he perceives, and that through the resulting conflict he not only grows in moral stature but also acts as a redemptive agent in the cause of humanity.[1]

Thus the purpose of exercising one's creative consciousness--one's complex imaginative abilities--is a moral one; it is to help to create the truth that one seeks in reality.

Browning searched for different levels of reality. The object of his search was personal and spiritual fulfillment. Philosophically, as Professor Johnson's article indicates, Browning was closely allied with the Pluralism of William James. Like James, Browning was interested in the psychological implications of pluralism. Again like James, Browning attempted to break through the relativistic limitations of Pluralism in his quest for a more unified structuring of reality. James attempted the quest through religion, Browning through art.

In his art, Browning searched for a new level of reality through myth. Myth figuratively describes the interaction which occurs within an individual's total personality, and between the individual and his world. It describes more than that which "exists." Concepts, words, things--these do not necessarily order experience. These do not always

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[1]"Robert Browning's Pluralistic Universe: A Reading of The Ring and the Book," TQ, 31 (October, 1961), 20-41.

explain. But inside a myth, the individual's response is total. He knows what the myth is talking about the moment he sees the action depicted. Such a response is common to readers of The Ring and the Book.

Myth in The Ring and the Book is not the subject of this thesis.[1] The source of myth--the creative consciousness that Browning believed existed in us all--is the subject. The more Browning explored the possibilities of the figurative world of art, the more it was obvious to him that such a world was itself real and part of life and an area where many of the truths of human experience reposed. Such an idea is not a novel discovery by any means. It is a discovery repeated time and again by many great artists. Browning's greatness lies in his attempt to disclose new levels of poetic reality. It was an aesthetic as well as an ethical discovery. In The Ring and the Book he did not want simply to resurrect the truth. "What was called for was a process of recreation." He apparently believed that "the artist's approach to his subject must be that of the Jamesian pluralist for whom the given facts of existence are not intractable, but malleable, awaiting the act of human violence which will engender truth on them."[2]

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[1]The subject is currently being undertaken by my colleague, Robert Stevens.

[2]Johnson, p. 39.

Arnold and Tennyson also made the attempt to re-create by exercising the "poet's ability to impose his own will to believe through the resources of an art which does not simply enunciate, but which actually becomes the vital form of that belief."[1] However, neither was concerned with developing new realities out of new materials. In Empedocles on Etna Arnold examined an old myth, and later on was convinced that all the old myths were dead, and that it was not possible in his own time for new myths to evolve. Tennyson was concerned with mythic elements in Idylls of the King and demonstrated that they had meaning in the shifting values of the Victorian Compromise.

Browning turned, in The Ring and the Book, to an obscure murder in late seventeenth-century Rome. From the point of view of the world of everyday affairs, the murder was not a myth but a fact. There are documents to prove that it actually happened. It has historical validity. For Browning, however, the history of the murder was not so important. As history, the murder was a "truth" of a sort because it was a fact and supposedly intractable. That is, it had truth in the sense that the incident itself was fixed and could not be taken away. But the murder gave Browning the materials he needed to evolve other truths, as real in life as in poetry, more felt imaginatively than known empirically. Browning's artistic problem was to ground his vision of these

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[1]Johnson, p. 41.

truths in the empirically established facts of human existence.

Browning desired to help create that very reality of which he was a part. The characters in The Ring and the Book are aware--sometimes vaguely, sometimes acutely--that they too are helping to engender the reality in which they live. Such an awareness was--or so at any rate will this thesis contend--the conscious artistic intention of Browning.

If we can suppose that Browning believed that the principle of the creative consciousness was part of the capabilities of each individual, then we are well on our way to comprehending the central concept which governs The Ring and the Book. This concept is love, or more broadly, universal sympathy. Love is not an entity, whole and complete in itself. It is a living, growing, changing "myth" or "truth" which is engendered upon this world by the people who search actively and creatively for it.

It is, in short, a reality which is made, not given. As a "truth" love is a "mythic" absolute perhaps, but not a theological or philosophical one. In fact, to speak of it, or any of the other "truths" in the world of The Ring and the Book as absolute is to speak in terms which are beside the point. Unlike Shelley, Browning was not bedazzled with the permanence or lack of permanence of his own visions of reality. But he was vitally concerned with demonstrating that in a multi-faceted world of conflicting beliefs and

values, we can only establish the "truth" by becoming involved with the "pure crude facts," the data, the objects, the things, of human existence.

To be sure, a part of reality is "given." We are born into a world we never made. But Browning would argue that, by exploring and exploiting our own imaginative and "mythic" capabilities we can help to re-order and re-shape and in fact help create this "given" reality. Why bother with this attempt? Because we are concerned, like Caponsacchi in Book VI of this poem, with establishing the truth, and through the establishment of truth we realize a sense of personal fulfillment. Today, we might perhaps call this the existential virtue of self-realization. We have contributed and shared--in a dynamic interaction--with the creative processes of reality.

2.

Ever since the publication of William O. Raymond's The Infinite Moment[1], students and critics of Robert Browning have been engaged in a search for a hypothesis which will provide us with the means of organizing new concepts in an approach to re-reading and re-analyzing Browning's poetry. This renewed interest in Browning is part of a general revival in the study of Victorian literature, a revival which has been ceaselessly reevaluating this period in our literary

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[1](Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950).

and cultural history. Raymond detected the beginnings of this revival, both in Browning and in the Victorian period generally, when he remarked that

> Browning has suffered, along with Tennyson, from the general reaction inimical to Victorianism and all its works which has characterized the opening decades of the twentieth century. There are signs that the nadir has been reached, and that a juster and truer appreciation of the Victorian epoch is at hand.[1]

Raymond himself has helped contribute to this new approach to Browning. In the opening essay of his book, also entitled "The Infinite Moment," Raymond desires to center his estimate of Browning on the latter's "artistic quality." Other aspects, he says, such as Browning's dramatic gift, and his style and diction, have been thoroughly studied. But what Raymond seeks to identify is basic--the "elemental spirit of Browning's art."[2]

Although Raymond does not settle this matter with as much success as he raises it, he nevertheless draws some early guidelines in the new approach to Browning. He notes that Browning himself spoke of his poetry "as momentary escapes of a bright and alive inner power." In a figure of speech, Browning compared this power to "flashes of light he had seen at sea leaping out at intervals from a narrow chink in a Mediterranean pharos."

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[1]Raymond, p. 3.

[2]Ibid., p. 6.

Raymond adds that Browning's favorite medium is "the dramatic monologue, which in his best work is the distillation of a crucial moment of human experience."[1] Raymond remarks that "the relation between the form and the content of the poetry of Browning is often a tension rather than a harmony."[2] Browning had once written to Ruskin that all poetry is the problem of "putting the infinite within the finite." And it is clear, Raymond continues, "that the crux of the struggle in his life as an artist was the difficulty of bodying forth the content of his imagination and intellect in adequate poetic forms." Browning was "striving to make his diction suitable for the new type of analytic poetry he was writing."[3]

Raymond contends that Browning's genius lies in the "Dionysiac fire of romantic art," of the "'moment one and infinite' of electrically charged emotion."[4] But Raymond's contention falters when, in attempting to lend support to his thesis, he falls back on a technique, similar to that of Arnold, of citing passages of Browning's poetry as examples of the "incomparable gusto" and the "flash of life" which he has attempted to single out as "the essential quality of [Browning's] poetry."[5]

Perhaps feeling that he had not really resolved the

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[1]Raymond, p. 7. [2]Ibid., p. 10.

[3]Ibid. [4]Ibid., p. 12.

[5]Raymond, passim., p. 15, 18.

issue that he had raised, Raymond explored further the problem of the "elemental spirit" of Browning's art in an important article which he published in 1955.[1] His point of departure is again Browning's own figure of speech, wherein, in his second letter to Elizabeth Barrett, Browning contrasts the "white light" of her lyric poetry with the "prismatic hues" which he believed best represented the "partial and oblique refraction of his own personality in the medium of the dramatic monologue."[2] Raymond links "the imagery of the prism, the rainbow, the broken and deflected light, with the humanism of Browning's poetry." And Raymond contends that although the "white light" of Browning's transcendentalism is important, it is secondary to the "'prismatic hues' of his humanism." In fact, Browning told Elizabeth Barrett, "I. . .fear the pure white light, even if it is in me."

In contrasting Browning to Shelley, Raymond points out that Shelley's "life and poetry are, in a sense, all of one piece." Browning, on the other hand, was motivated by his consciousness of the necessity of reconciling the absolute claims of the ideal with the concrete realities of man's existence on earth."[3] Though Browning views the aspiration of the soul as infinite and its destiny immortal, he holds

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[1]"'The Jewelled Bow': A Study In Browning's Imagery and Humanism," PMLA, 70 (March, 1955), 115-131.

[2]Ibid., p. 115. [3]Ibid.

"that it must stoop to conquer." Browning views the incarnation of Christ in a similar fashion, and this view is part of his idea of the nature and function of love: "The divine condescension to human weakness and imperfection is conceived of by Browning as flowing from the very essence of God as a being of infinite love."[1] And, Raymond maintains, it is through "the sovereign virtue of love" that the two basic attitudes or dispositions of Browning's mind and spirit--transcendental and humanistic--are reconciled. In this view, the deepest meaning of love stems from an innate sympathy for the weakness and imperfection of human nature. Browning viewed the facts of knowledge skeptically and was convinced that "God and man are in communion through the sovereign instrumentality of love."[2]

Raymond summarizes the basic difference between Browning and Shelley by stating that

> For Shelley the limitations of man's life on earth, the finitude of his lot, are "stains"; they dim and obscure "the white radiance of Eternity." For Browning, they are material for transmutation and transfiguration.[3]

Thus, from Browning's view, man's finite experiences "may be not stains, but jewels, enriching the white light by mellowing and humanizing it into prismatic hues."[4] And he concludes that, "It is 'the prismatic hues' of Browning's

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[1] Ibid., p. 117. [2] Ibid., p. 123.

[3] Ibid., p. 126. [4] Ibid.

humanism which constitute his most important contribution to English poetry."[1]

As Browning saw it, these prismatic hues were like a jewelled rainbow, variecolored, alternately clouded and brilliant. It was at the heart of his artistic as well as his moral and spiritual make-up. And it is one of the rays of this "jewelled bow" with which this thesis will be concerned.

3.

The body of comtemporary critical opinion in Browning and in Victorian literature generally represents the results of studies which have worked up to an analysis of individual poems. The tools generally used in this approach are quite often identified with New Criticism, and the method is generally referred to as "close reading," "practical criticism," or perhaps more accurately, "interpretive analysis." Today, this method is, of course, only one among many employed by modern Victorian critics--as indeed by most modern critics--who, while apparently having been trained in the methods of interpretive analysis, tend to be eclectic in the critical methods they employ and, as was suggested above, are even now seeking to go beyond any particular method in an effort to find some new approach towards the reading and understanding of Victorian poetry, and of individual poets

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[1]Ibid., p. 131.

of the Victorian period. It is hoped that this present study will follow in the lines established toward this new approach.

In Browning's case, the most significant studies of recent years indicate two important facts: (1) that Browning criticism has become sophisticated enough to re-establish serious Browning study, and (2) that Browning critics who are recognized for their abilities and their critical insights all seem to be slowly converging upon the same goal: namely, that of discovering a new level of criticism upon which to read and study this most complex and elusive poet.

Robert Langbaum stated recently that throughout the decade of the nineteen-fifties young scholars "have been trying to make out a new case for Browning according to the rigorous analytic methods of modern criticism.[1] Langbaum himself is one of the more important of the "young scholars" to whom he refers. Langbaum's book, The Poetry of Experience,[2] a generic analysis of Browning's dramatic monologue, represents the complex critical approach to Browning which the latter's work demands.

The central chapter in Langbaum's study--it is located in almost the exact center of the book--is a chapter

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[1]Review of Browning's Characters, VS, 5 (March, 1962), 269.

[2](New York: Random House, 1957).

devoted to The Ring and the Book and entitled "The Ring and the Book: A Relativist Poem."[1]

In calling it s relativist poem, Langbaum does not mean that the judgments of the poem are intended to be relative--that is, indefinite or a matter of opinion. It is relativist, he says, "in that the social and religious absolutes are not the means for understanding the right and wrong of the poem." In fact, he adds, "they are for the most part barriers to understanding."[2] Langbaum points out that in the poem, those established institutions which have traditionally distinguished right from wrong--"the law, the Church, the authority of parents and husband"--have been either completely wrong or have been unable to see the main point--"Pompilia's absolute goodness and Guido's badness."[3] During the unfolding of the murder case, "the courts, the lawyers, the representative of the impartial line of Roman opinion," demonstrate one peculiar attribute in common: they have all "committed the 'relativist' fallacy of supposing that there must be right and wrong on each side."[4]

Pompilia is constantly misled by these authorities, but in spite of all these external influences and with everything against her, she "finds the right way because her instinct is right."[5] Caponsacchi, precisely because he was

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[1]Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, (New York: Random House, 1957), 109-36.

[2]Ibid., p. 113. [3]Ibid. [4]Ibid. [5]Ibid.

a society priest, a dandy, a gallant, was in a position because of "his fresh ear to hear the contrasting moral cry of Pompilia, while pious Christians had grown 'too obtuse/ Of ear, through iteration of command.'" (X, 1198-99)[1]

The judgments of Pompilia, Caponsacchi and the Pope are not only "independent of official morality," but they are also "in conflict with it and in this sense relative to the particular conditions of the poem and to the motives and quality of the characters."[2] Langbaum points out that all the incidental speakers in the poem had their own motives for speaking. We as readers, therefore, "must judge what is being said by who is saying it."[3] Truth in the case comes to depend upon what is being theorized about and who is doing the theorizing. Thus, the incidental speakers--Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome, Tertium Quid and the two lawyers--do not have strong enough motives for finding the truth. "In contrast to the inadequate motives of the 'world' we have the Pope's high seriousness,"[4] Caponsacchi's heroic impulses and Pompilia's "white light." In short, these figures might prove to be mistaken in their actions, but their motives are pure.

The Pope's judgments, says Langbaum, are not judgments of fact "but judgments of character." Although the Pope reviews the facts and arguments carefully, he is able to cut through them to the "motives and essential moral qualities behind

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[1] Ibid., p. 114. [2] Ibid. [3] Ibid., p. 115.

[4] Ibid., p. 120.

the deeds."[1] In this sense, facts nor any other external yardstick--"whether legal, Christian, or conventional"--yield the truth. The moral judgments that Caponsacchi and the Pope make are definite and extreme. The reader thus arrives at "not the truth, but truth as the worthiest characters of the poem see it." In this way, Langbaum says that the truth is "psychologized"--that is, it is induced from the psychological make-up of the characters in the poem.

Truth is also "historicized," says Langbaum. The facts of the murder and the arguments offered by the lawyers do not reveal the basic moral struggle between Guido and Pompilia. In the same manner, "the legal and ecclesiastical machinery of the time proves inadequate to reveal and judge the moral issue."[2] The Pope, as he is reviewing the case, is distressed that in his own time "The machinery of Christianity showed itself to be...almost completely at odds with the meaning of Christianity."[3] However, the Pope is encouraged because, in spite of all the wrong external guidance, Pompilia kept the essential meaning of Christianity alive through sheer right instinct. The Pope perceives that in the new age that is ahead--an age where Christianity and the Church will no longer be the uncontested authority to decide "heresies"--men like Caponsacchi "will reject dogma and declare themselves a law unto themselves."[4]

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[1] Ibid., p. 121. [2] Ibid., p. 122. [3] Ibid., p. 123.
[4] Ibid.

In this way, the Pope understands that truth is other than "the machinery by which people try to understand it." In any given age, the machinery we use to "prove" truth shifts--regardless of whether or not that proof is found in myth or dogma. Truth itself always seems to remain--this is the assumption and there is no getting behind it--and is never in equilibrium with the machinery that is supposed to understand it; at times it is in direct conflict with it. It thus becomes a "necessary disequilibrium, for injustice shows up the old machinery as inadequate."[1] When man attempts to adapt the machinery of understanding to the truth--and the truth is always in advance of the machinery--he "advances his moral understanding." Thus, historically, "truth is larger and in advance of the formulations and institutions of any age."[2]

The conclusion to be drawn from the Pope's observations is that "fixed principles and the institutions which embody them can never be adequate to judge the truth." Judgment depends on the "essential moral quality of the judge."

Thus, as Langbaum sees it, truth on psychological grounds is relative. It is relative to "the nature of the judge and person being judged." Truth is also relative historically. It is relative to the amount of disequilibrium which exists in any given age, "between truth and the institutions by which truth is understood."[3] Caponsacchi and

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[1] Ibid. [2] Ibid., p. 124. [3] Ibid., p. 125.

Pompilia prove that, psychologically, their right instincts are a "guarantee that truth maintains itself in the human heart in spite of history, of external change." On the other hand, historically, the Pope comes to believe that "the murder case shows that truth maintains itself by means of history."[1] That is, the disequilibrium that exists between the truth and the machinery that is supposed to apprehend it is historically necessary. The injustice that is committed exposes the corruption of the old order and helps to bring out the moral qualities of men seeking new machinery to establish a new order.

It is Langbaum's belief that Browning wrote The Ring and the Book by starting with Goethe's condition that a poem is not to derive its meaning "from any external standard of judgment, but is to be the empiric ground giving rise to its own standard of judgment."[2] Browning fruther imposed a still harder condition: he chose not to write on the basis of traditional categories, or, like Goethe, to give "meaning to an old myth"; instead, Browning draws "his meaning out of 'pure crude fact.'" To be sure, his poem has an historical basis, but it is one that reveals the life that goes on below the level of history--in this case an obscure Roman murder case in the late seventeenth century.

In his discussion, Langbaum does not come to grips with the "end" values for Browning, nor for the reader.

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[1] Ibid., p. 128. [2] Ibid., p. 132.

Perhaps Langbaum has carried too far his emphasis on relativistic judgment, judgment which is "psychologized and historicized" on a relative basis.

Indeed, it is not doing Browning justice to limit his vision to the modern conditions of psychological and historical relativism. He was, after all, trying to establish a basis for absolute judgment. In The Ring and the Book we do not judge the characters so much as they judge each other and themselves. However, we judge ourselves as readers and we judge our responses to the poem. In fact, Browning is asking us to help create the reality of the poem. He is, in essence, asking us to help create the truth for ourselves. This quality is the one referred to earlier as the principle of the "creative consciousness."

The present study is concerned with the way Browning developed this principle in The Ring and the Book. More specifically, it will seek to demonstrate that Browning viewed this consciousness as primarily an artistic phenomenon, and that the exercise of it was necessary in order for us to help shape the reality of the world in which we lived. Perhaps we can understand this idea better if we examine the central metaphor which illustrates Browning's notion of the creative consciousness and how it works.

4.

"Do You See This Ring?"

When Browning asks, "Do you see this Ring?" in the

first line of The Ring and the Book, he is asking the most important question of his poetic life-time. For he is making a demand on his reader that no nineteenth-century English poet ever made before him. He is asking the reader to help create the myth and the reality of The Ring and the Book. He is asking the reader to help establish a dynamic interaction between poet and reader. He is asking the reader: "Will you contribute you own imaginative and metaphoric abilities to this poem?" And he is implying that only if the reader derives artistic inspiration from the poem will he be able to contribute his own creative, "mythic" insights. Such an interaction, growing and evolving as the reader explores the world of The Ring and the Book, is Browning's final quest. It is, finally, all he can and should hope for.

When Browning asks, "Do you see this Ring?" he is asking the reader to "see" creatively, imaginatively, intuitively, metaphorically, symbolically, mythically. Yet he is asking the empirical question, "Reader, do you see this golden ring that I hold in my hand?" Such a union between the literal and the imaginative is what Browning is asking--in fact demanding--of the reader. The reader must work to share in the creative processes of this poem. The reader, just as Browning did in 1864 and after, can help to engender that very reality which we call life and of which he and we are a part.

The reader, as we shall see when this problem is

explored further in the last chapter of this thesis, must come to regard The Ring and the Book as a metaphor. This is not by any means a new way to view poetry. No, what is new is what that metaphor represents for the mid-twentieth century reader. The metaphor, simply stated, is thus: The Ring and the Book is an evasive, shifting, growing, evolving, "pure crude fact." The reality which comes to exist between the reader and the poem is partially created by both. The reader accepts what is "given": the poem is an historical fact; it was written down, printed, and has become part of the memory of mankind. Each reader recognizes that he has inherited it. But as he reads it, he is asked to bring more than sensitivity or empathy or a close exercise of his critical faculties. He is asked to think creatively, to contribute his own share of artistic ability to the poem.

Browning saw that, in a pluralistic world, the facts are never all in. The reality of our lives is never all "given." This is why he is able to ask rhetorically "Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?"--because he knows the answer. The answer lies in his question, "Do you see this Ring?" The metaphor involved here, Browning implies, is a comparison between the reality of the poet and his poem, and the reality of the reader in his own world, regardless of the period in which he lives. The reader adds his fancy to the "facts" of the poem just as Browning added his fancy to the facts of The Old Yellow Book. Browning's metaphor centers around an interacting

process: just as he demonstrates that the characters in his poem help to re-shape and re-order, for better or for worse, the reality of their lives, so too can the reader, through reading the poem imaginatively, not only add new facts to the poem, bringing in more evidence (his fancy) which was missing both at the murder trial and at the writing of the poem, but the reader can simultaneously help to re-shape, to change around, to actually transfigure into something new, the reality of his own life.

"Do you see this Ring?" is Browning's "reach beyond his grasp" and as he demonstrates in the heart of his poem, this is what a heaven mythically is for. He is asking us, as readers, to reach beyond ourselves, to reach up and "gain" this ring. Because we can make this ring just as Browning did. The facts of our lives are pure gold, soft malleable, and not "firm to file." We must think "into" and "out of" The Ring and the Book to help create meaning in our own private experience.

"Do you see this Ring?" is one of the most exciting questions ever raised in English poetry and we as readers creatively share in that excitement.

CHAPTER II

THE MAKING OF THE RING

"Do you see this ring?" Browning asks.[1] It was made in Rome, constructed in the manner in which the worker in Etruscan gold prepares the ornament circlet which will be worn as a ring; circlets which are found glistening and alive, among the fig-tree roots which have been unearthed on a slope and serve as the roof of the old tombs at Chiusi. The Ring is like the Etruscan circlet, "soft, you see," yet it is crisp because it has been cut by the jeweler. There is a trick which enables one to manipulate particles of pure gold, as the Ring once was, gold which was almost like wax when first taken from the mine, as virgin as the ripened honey-combs. The gold is brought forth from the mine soft and shapeless. A way must be found to enable the gold to withstand the teeth of a file or the tap of a hammer. The hammer is needed to round the gold into a ring, the file to raise the surface of the metal in order to put the ornaments

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[1]All quotations of The Ring and the Book are from The Poetical Works of Robert Browning, (2 vols; London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1896), II, 1-291.

on the ring. But the pure metal is soft; it must be mixed with an alloy to gain the necessary power of resistance. In a figurative sense, the artisan melts wax and honey together. That is, he mingles gold with an alloy and, working the mixture, he soon gets a metal which can be managed. Once his work is ended the ring is partially restored to its earlier nature, by dissolving the surface alloy from the gold with an acid solution and thus producing a pure film of gold on the surface of the ring. The ring was gold, is now gold, and shall be forever gold. It is nature's original but with "added artistry," without the loss of a karat, and we have "gained a ring." "What of it?" the reader at this point might ask. But suppose the ring has significance as a symbol, as the sign of a real life object. Suppose the ring, an object itself, stands for a fact or an artifact, a fact which was once a living reality but is now part of the memory of mankind? (I, 1-32)

The poet addresses the reader again: "Do you see this square old yellow Book?" he asks. The Ring stands for, symbolizes, but is not the Book. Browning tosses the Book in the air excitedly, catches it again, and twirls it about by its "crumpled vellum covers." The book is "pure crude fact." He stands in a kind of "naive wonder,"[1] because he is still overwhelmed at his own good fortune. It is one of

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[1]The "naive wonder" is a phrase borrowed from Langbaum and is part of a recent disagreement among Ring critics, to be specified later.

the great discoveries of his life, the finding of this square old yellow Book. The squareness of the Book contrasts with the roundness of the Ring. The Book is dull yellow, the Ring glistening and golden. The Book is old, the vellum paper is soft and crumpling; the Ring is new and hardened; it is a new metaphor, a new idea. The Book is a dead object, lifeless when first found in a stall in the Piazza San Lorenzo of Florence. The Ring gives it new life. The Ring interprets the Book, transforms and penetrates through the Book. The hard, tooth-edge quality of the Ring has given shape to the pure, crude facts of the Book. But the facts have remained hidden in a book-stall, dulled and obscured under the fading yellow cover and the parched vellum paper of the square old Book. Browning mixes the pure crude facts of the Book with an alloy--his own artistic shaping power--and rounds the soft square crumpling papers of the old yellow Book into the hard circle of the living Ring. Just as the artisan takes the soft metal of the gold and mixes it with an alloy to give it resistance, so Browning takes the pure crude facts, soft and shapeless, distorted and yet somehow true, and intermingles his own poetic alloy of fancy (imagination) in order to give the pure facts shape and sense and meaning. The square Book of pure crude fact becomes the round Ring of pure fact, no longer crude but given organization and meaning because of Browning's added artistry. In the square old Book the facts appeared in the soft pages--endlessly, aimlessly--one on top

of the other. But mixed with the alloy, the facts are linked together in a circle of meaning to find the circumference of truth.

He tosses the Book in the air and takes it again. He describes it further. It is of small quarto-size but a divine hand is on his shoulder as his eye picks it out among the confused welter of out-of-date and worthless stuff in the book-stall. But, he tells us, "one glance at the lettered back of which,/ And 'Stall!' cried I: a lira made it mine." (I, 82-3) It is a book in shape but actually "pure crude fact,"

> Secreted from man's life when hearts beat hard,
> And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since.
> (I, 87-8)

From then on, nothing distracts him from his prize until he "had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth" of the Book. "Romana Homicidiorum," it reads on the title page. Nay, he says, I better translate. "A Roman murder-case, "it would read, and then underneath:

> "Position of the entire criminal cause
> "Of Guido Franceschini, nobleman,
> "With certain Four the cutthroats in his pay,
> "Tried, all five, and found guilty and put to death
> "By heading or hanging as befitted ranks,
> "At Rome on February Twenty Two,
> "Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight:
> "Wherein it is disputed if, and when,
> "Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet 'scape
> "The customary forfeit." (I, 122-31)

This, he tells us, is what the square old yellow Book is about. This is the thing signified by the Ring. He beseeches us to

hold fast the figure of the "lingot gold," pure and untampered, before it is forged into the Ring. In the same way, absolute truth lay in the pure crude facts of this Roman murder-case--the murder itself, the trial, the prosecution and defense, the appeal to the Pope and, finally, the execution. (I, 141-363) He tells us:

> This is the bookful; thus far take the truth,
> The untempered gold, the fact untampered with,
> The mere ring-metal ere the ring by made. (I, 364-66)

These pure facts, not yet tampered with, are like the pure gold, not yet mixed with an alloy. The facts represent the metal for the ring, and now need shaping.

But why resurrect this obscure old murder of two centuries ago? Was the truth as it supposedly came out at the trial able to take "its own part as truth should,/ Sufficient, self-sustaining? Why, if so-/ Yonder's a fire, into it goes my book." (I, 373-75) But what if the pure crude fact of the yellow Book needs interpreting, needs to be molded into meaning?

Browning takes his book to Rome to try "truth's power on likely people." (I, 423 f.) "Have you met such names?" he asks. "Is a tradition extant of such facts?" The Romans respond, "'You'll waste your pains on names and facts thus old.'"[1] And besides, the Romans with whom

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[1]This rephrasing of Browning, and also the translation of some particular words below, is from Paul A. Cundiff's "The Clarity of Browning's Ring Metaphor," PMLA, 63 (December, 1948), 1277.

he talks ask skeptically, "don't you deal in poetry, make-believe,/ And the white lies it sounds like?" (I, 455-56) They want to know in what sense he can take the Roman murder case and transform it into a make-believe poem without destroying the pure crude fact that he seems to believe is in the yellow Book. "Do you tell the story, now, in off-hand style,/ Straight from the book?" (I, 451-52) Or do you keep a hint of the original in your poem here and there?

The poet replies "Yes and no!" (I, 457) Yes, he tells the story straight from the old yellow Book:

> thence bit by bit I dug
> The lingot [solid mass] truth, that memorable day,
> Assayed [analyzed critically] and knew my piecemeal
> gain was gold,--
> Yes; but from something else surpassing that,
> Made it bear hammer and be firm to file. (I, 458-63)

Just as "gold is dug from the earth before ring-making may begin Browning first dug from the Book the pure and unadulterated facts."[1]

> Fancy with fact is just one fact the more;
> To-wit, that fancy has informed, transpierced,
> Thridded [threaded] and so thrown fast the facts else free
> As right through ring and ring runs the djereed [javelin]
> And binds the loose, one bar without a break. (I, 464-68)

Browning is again asking the audience to hold the figure fast. He mixed the pure fact of the yellow Book with "something else surpassing" the facts of the Book, "to make them malleable and firm to file. His comparison means that what-

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[1]Cundiff, p. 1278.

ever he found in the Book was to him what pure gold is to the artificer."[1]

> I fused my live soul and that inert stuff,
> Before attempting smithcraft. (I, 469-70)

His soul is the alloy, the "something else surpassing." The facts are "inert stuff." By his "smithcraft" he will breathe life into the dead facts of the yellow Book, "his fancy with those facts." (I, 681) "I used to tell the tale," he says, "and seldom lacked a listener." (I, 680-81) He forges the alloy of his fancy with the gold of the facts, producing a shapely ring, one which lay ready to be bathed in acid. He had earlier called the bathing a "repristination," (I, 23) that is, a return of the Ring to its original state. But he had told us we had "gained a ring," from this soft pure gold. He knows that the acid only keeps the outside of the Ring from tarnishing and gives the ring surface a film of pure gold. The alloy is still there. "How much of the tale was true?" he asks. "I disappeared; the book grew all in all." (I, 686-87)

Just as the tarnish is removed from the surface of the Ring, so Browning removes himself from the face of the poem and disappears into the heart of the poem. But the alloy, he knows and we know, is still there. It is the "added artistry," the "something else surpassing." It is necessary. He has told us that fancy is just one fact the

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[1] Ibid.

more. But it is no less important. It is the necessary, the life-giving, analyzing, ordering, hypothetical fact--this fancy of the poet. His fancy is the "interior structure, the quality which makes the. . .ring durable and shapely."[1]

So the poet turns artificer and through smithcraft, forges the Ring. He dissects the old yellow Book, tempering, hammering, filing the crude facts of this forgotten scandal. When he was in the Piazza San Lorenzo, his eyes roaming across the litter and bric-a-brac of the book-stall, one glance at the lettered back of the old yellow Book, almost hidden and forgotten, was enough. Two centuries had made the facts dead, but pure nevertheless. And at a point in time, the facts, the events, the characters were alive. The triple murder actually happened, the blood flowed. The brains of Guido and Caponsacchi clashed and "Husband and wife and priest, met face to face." (I, 516) The problem is how to breathe the living truth into these dead facts.

So the Ring is forged. The Ring is not the old yellow Book but is the poem, The Ring and the Book. It is fact with fancy one fact the more. "Lovers of dead truth," Browning asks, "did ye fare the worse?" That is, since the pure crude facts have not been debased by the addition of his alloy, they are even more valuable than before. "Lovers of live truth," he then asks, "found ye false my tale?" (I, 696-97) Again the answer has already been given. He has

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[1]Ibid., p. 1279.

told us that the "truth about Guido's murder of Pompilia reposed in the legal documents containing the details of the case, but was only to be deduced through interpretation of the material by a mind endowed with imaginative insight."[1] He wants to make the truth live again, but in a different way. He cannot physically go back in time. He must somehow bring the facts back by means of the forge; afterwards the facts go through a repristination, but not literally. That is, once the facts are embossed in the poem, they cannot return to their original state as they appeared in the old yellow Book. But they can appear in an analogous state in the poem. With insatiable scientific curiosity[2], he has sifted through the old yellow Book. He suspects that the truth is locked up in the facts. His purpose is to "unlock the truth,"[3] by exercising his creative consciousness. In order for the seeming separation of the alloy from the gold to take place "once the ring has been shaped, Browning says he retained the sense and manner of the documentation" of the old yellow Book.

The ring is a finely-wrought piece of artistic craftsmanship. The goldsmith has taken a shapeless mass of gold and molded it into a ring, thus achieving order and

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[1]E.D.H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 133-34.

[2]Ralph B. Crum, Scientific Thought in Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931), p. 194.

[3]Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 132.

symmetry from what was a disorganized mass of raw material. The ring stands for love. Thus love is the central force of order in the world of human experience. It also is the symbol of Browning's artistic shaping power.

Thus "fiction which makes fact alive" is ultimately fact too. (I, 705) The alloy rounds the circle, a spurt of acid takes away its trace, leaving the alloy inside; and, "justifiably golden," (I, 1387-89) "we have gained a ring."

CHAPTER III

THE TESTING OF THE BOOK

1

What else does the square old yellow Book represent besides fact? And what is a fact anyway? It is an action, an object, a past event, something that really happened. The Book itself is a fact. It has substance and reality. When Browning singled out the yellow cover in the book-stall it was a fact which loomed very large in his eyes. Was he even then interpreting the Book? Why was he so excited by seeing the inscription "Romana Homicidiorum" on the Book's spine?

In the poem he seems to have, at that point, conceived the first fruits of his plan. In Rome, the eternal city, a city which suggests creativity and destruction, love and hate, myth and spirit, the paradoxical city of Christian and pagan ethos, Browning in his poem located the factual account of a murder. An obscure case in itself, yet surely he must have developed its possibilities in his mind in the years from 1860 to 1864. In a sense, it suggested a microcosm of some pervasive truth or truths found

in human experience.

As he, in a figurative and perhaps even a literal sense, walked back in mindless preoccupation through the realities of a Florence contemporaneous with his own life, surely a process of artistic empathy and creation was at work while he rapidly turned the crumpled pages of the old yellow Book. Why suddenly, could he conceive of murder and marriage as being at the center of this microcosmic world? Why did it assume such immediate significance there in the book-stall?

Despite what Browning may have really thought when he actually did find the book, in the poem he represents himself as making the greatest discovery of his life. Moreover, he recognizes his discovery immediately. It is as though the book is the key to the philosophical puzzle of his own existence and perhaps the existence of all human beings. The book is part of the memory of mankind. It is the real-life story of a murder by marriage, obscure, shadowy, yet evocative of man's relation to man and woman. For Browning the book seems to have suggested myth, romance, chivalry and the interconnecting traditions of eastern and western culture.

The terrible beauty of Pompilia's innocence leads Guido to a destructive act. There is no evil in Pompilia. And her innocence is not of the Garden variety. She puts her innocence to the test of knowledge when she flees from

Guido. Caponsacchi views Guido as irreducible evil and cannot conceive of any salvation for him because he senses but cannot accept the mystery of the union of earthly and heavenly love. No, the evil is in the string of events, the fact linked upon fact that lead to her inevitable death. For her death is inevitable but in no way fated or determined. The strange chain of events is brought about by one fact after another, of the human actions of the Comparini, of Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome, of Tertium Quid, of Guido, Caponsacchi, Pompilia herself, the lawyers, and finally the Pope..

The events unfold. Fact follows upon fact, once the event itself occurs, once the action is completed. Browning turns the facts over in Book I and then carries the reader through many emotional keys. The very facts of the case become matters of dispute. Half-Rome has his own interpretation of the events to favor Guido. He insists throughout that what he says is fact, "a fact none dare dispute." All the old law is now back in force, he says: husbands may kill faithless wives and their lovers. Other Half-Rome is prejudiced toward the Comparini and Pompilia, who lies dying. There is an emphasis on the evils of lying. Tertium Quid is a nobleman, sophisticated, cooly weighing the two sides of the story, finding both guilty. But his statements are qualified by his scorn of the whole affair, his detachment from the events, his frequent interruptions to address his noble listeners.

Guido judges Pompilia by the law, but he justifies his murder of her by another law, what he calls the law of the "first conscience." To Caponsacchi, Pompilia inspires a mystic, religious conversion and he defends the innocence which Pompilia exposes as an absolute entity when she compares herself to a mutilated statue of the virgin and child. The lawyers irrelevantly and irreverently abuse Pompilia's timeless virtue. One is the kindly father who is without scruples in his own profession. Both are indifferent to the truth of the case. They ignore the central fact of Pompilia. The concept of law, the established institution, is uppermost in their arguments during the murder trial. "The presence of such a conventional institution of law, so far removed from real justice and truth, is a profoundly significant aspect of Pompilia's tragedy."[1]

The Pope, however, is aware of his human limitations in judgment. And he answers the ironic riddle: who shall die first, the old Pope or Guido? An element of doubt about his judgment haunts him, but he furnishes a glimpse of God's completeness through self-sacrificing love. He sends the order. "How should I dare die, this man live?" Guido defends his actions. The Church fooled him. He lived behind the mask of conventional Christianity. The whole world of Rome lived behind a mask of pretense, the tacitly agreed

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[1]Charles W. Hodell, The Old Yellow Book, (Washington: The Carnegie Institute, 1908), p. (4).

upon convention of Christianity. Life was a lie which he lived like all the rest. Why now, he asks, does the mask presume to hide not a lie but the truth? He finally calls upon that innocence which he murdered. "Pompilia," he cries, "will you let them murder me?"

The actions one by one occur, are recorded, and they too become facts, just more material fro Browning's story, simply the rounding out of his discovery. The Book becomes his key. Something that seems to have eluded him has now been uncovered. And he will not be blinded by these facts as the two lawyers were.

2

Browning turns his key into a ring. And at the end of the first book of the poem, that ring is his objective declaration of himself, of the significance of his experience in relation to the facts in the old yellow Book. In Book I (1391-1416) the ring is love, suggested by the simple golden ring of his wife. The ring is symbol and fact, the union of divine and earthly love. Browning cannot be divested of the temporal limitations of his own self. He can never be effectively objective about his own experience if he simply recounts it. Neither can the old yellow Book do it for him, because the facts locked inside the old yellow Book are in themselves without meaning, "for the crime, as history, is of little value, and evidence is but fragmentary."[1] The

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[1]Hodell, p. (4).

facts become lasting only when forged into the ring. The ring, itself a fact, objectifies the truth by intermingling the points of view of the characters of the murder case. The facts in the old yellow Book are not enough. They don't tell the truth. Browning is unable to trust the way the facts are recorded in the Book. He must go to Rome and Arezzo and inquire into the matter himself. "Have you met such names?" he asks. "Is there a tradition extant of such facts?" (I, 453-54)

He tells himself that the facts represent absolute truth; this, because they are irreducible. Human actions, once committed, cannot be altered. With both happiness and dismay, he knows that in this sense, facts are absolute truths, absolute because they are now non-temporal, true because once committed, they cannot be denied. Thus Pompilia really was murdered; once committed, the action cannot be subject to any temporal laws. Pompilia's murder is also a truth. It is a kind of dead truth because it is dependent on fact, the fact of the murder, before it can exist as a truth.

But the universal facts about Pompilia--as they are interpreted in the different monologues--are not dead. These truths, stemming from the differing visions of human experience, somehow become objectified and assume a life of their own. The ring gives them their completeness.

3

A recent, mild series of disagreements has occurred in four articles published lately in the Victorian Newsletter[1] regarding fact in The Ring and the Book. Although the disagreement itself--whether or not Browning believed he remained true to the facts of the old yellow Book--seems somewhat beside the point, what was stated in the meantime by all the articles leads the reader into a very fruitful discussion of the problem of fact as it appears in The Ring and the Book , and not as it is seen in comparison to its faithfulness to the old yellow Book. Robert Langbaum easily disposes of the initial problem--if it is a problem at all--by stating that "no one could read both the Old Yellow Book and The Ring and the Book and suppose that they were the same."[2] For example, the habit of Browning's of referring to his source as a "square old yellow book" is itself misleading, since really what he bought in Florence

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[1]The articles in chronological order: (1) Paul A. Cundiff, "Robert Browning: 'Our Human Speech,'" VNL, 15 (Spring, 1959), 1-9; (2) Reply by Donald Smalley, "Browning's View of Fact in The Ring and the Book," VNL, 16 (Fall, 1959), 1-9; (3) Rebuttal by Cundiff, "Robert Browning: 'Indisputably Fact,;: VNL, 17 (Spring, 1960), 7-11; and finally, (4) a comment on the disagreement by a third party, Robert Langbaum, who believes he has been partially misunderstood by both sides, in "The Importance of Fact in The Ring and the Book," VNL, 17 (Spring, 1960), 11-17.

[2]Langbaum, "The Importance of Fact," p. 12.

was a series of pamphlets tied together by a vellum cover which had yellowed with age, part print, part manuscript, and not, properly speaking, a book at all. There are of course a great many other differences between the two works and, as Langbaum remarks, "these are not surprising if we remember that we are dealing after all with a poem."[1]

Langbaum then settles the first part of the controversy by pointing out that

> There is not. . .much disagreement over the first question, whether Browning really did stick to the facts. Everyone admits that he did not stick entirely to the facts. . . .Here again everyone reads the ring metaphor to mean that Browning intended to mix fancy with fact. When later in Book I he poses the rhetorical question, "Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?" (705), we must infer that he is claiming some license for interpretation and even for amplification and invention.[2]

Even while Langbaum rightly disposes of this first part of the argument, he glides too easily over the real problem. When quoting the passage "Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?" he correctly points out that Browning is claiming a poetic license to use his own fancy. The question is, why does Browning refer to his fancy as "fact"? This is actually where the confusion rests. What does he mean by "fact" here? He knows that part of his poem is fiction. He is obviously suggesting that when fiction is used to make facts alive, it becomes fact too. The question then is, indeed, a rhetorical one, since Browning is going to demonstrate in the

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[1]Ibid. [2]Ibid.

poem that the facts were capable of being turned into non-truths by the disputants, and only his fancy can bring them back into proper perspective. He therefore means that his fancy--his poetic shaping power--becomes part of the evidence of the trial--the part that was missing at the trial. The most important fact turns out to be a fiction, not even in existence at the trial. This fiction is partially embodied in the Pope, since he is closer to placing the facts in their proper position than Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome, and is able to cut through the legal terminology of the two lawyers. But no one at the trial is able to supply the missing evidence of Browning's fancy, the alloy. It is in this sense, in keeping with the language of the poem, that Browning is referring to his fancy as "fact, too."

Langbaum says that the real issue of the Victorian Newsletter disagreement is "over the importance of facts." He asks, "Where else does a poet feel it necessary to explain that he is going to mix fancy with fact?"

> Clearly Browning established certain novel conditions which did, as a matter of record, open his poem to historical judgment. . . .We are more impressed by the gold or fact in the ring metaphor than by the alloy or fancy. Gold has the advantage over alloy (though I do not think that was in Browning's mind); besides we expect fancy, it is the emphasis on fact which is new and accounts for the present controversy.[1]

This emphasis on fact is important because it is related to truth. As Langbaum says,

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[1]Ibid.

> Browning did not of course think that facts could be picked up readymade like pebbles, or that they would lead anybody to the truth....Browning tells us that the perception of truth is a creative or imaginative act, and that fact is merely an index to the truth which is always much larger.[1]

This is what Browning means in Book XII in the line, "So write a book shall mean beyond the facts." (XII, 886) This line does not lessen the importance of facts. As Langbaum points out,

> The reason for Browning's excitement over his real life subject is this: that without the jumble of true and false, good and bad, which are the raw stuff of life, there would be no meaning to truth. If fact is important as an index to truth, truth itself cannot be known except through fact or material conditions.[2]

This passage suggests the center of the controversy. From Browning's point of view, what is the difference between fact and truth? Why does he keep referring to the facts of the old yellow Book as gold and absolute truth and then later imply that truth can only be perceived after the facts are mixed with the alloy? Here again, it seems apparent that Browning consistently uses the terms which will be in keeping with the language both of the poem and the old yellow Book. Browning's artistic strategy is to make the poem resemble the old yellow Book. The way the depositions and letters are arranged in the old Book surely must have suggested the division of the poem into points of view. In Book I, though there is a careful explanation of the ring meta-

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[1] Ibid., p. 13. [2] Ibid.

phor, Browning emphasizes the pure crude fact, the absolute truth of the old yellow Book. In Book XII, he emphasizes the ring, and gives less emphasis to the facts:

> our human speech is nought
> Our human testimony false, our fame
> And human estimation words and wind. (XII, 834-36)

Art remains the "one way possible/ Of speaking truth" by telling it "obliquely." Thus a "book shall mean beyond the facts." The facts are simply the index to truth.

Browning gains his ring by testing the facts, by placing his own vision into the old yellow Book of dead truth and fallible human law. The Pope earlier had done something like this because he had found so much in human life that makes for doubt, including the human law which presumably orders human experience. He knows that the law is fallible, and also subject to constant abuse. He does not repudiate the law; he concludes by working on the side of the law. But he recognizes its limitations.

In a like manner, Browning regards the old yellow Book. The facts in the Book are absolute truths, yet, paradoxically, they are not infallible, because they are the results of the actions of human beings. Browning regards the old yellow Book the way the Pope regards the law case. The facts are there, irreducible, but they must be tested by another kind of law which comes from within, as men listen to the voice of God.

> Let this old woe step on the stage again!
> Act itself o'er anew for men to judge.
> Not by the very sense and sight indeed--

> Which take at best imperfect cognizance,
> Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand,
> What mortal every in entirety saw? (I, 824-29)

Browning thus helps to re-shape the world of the Roman murder case. Within the framework of the poem, Caponsacchi, Pompilia and the Pope realize the plastic nature of reality and perceive in varying degrees that they can help shape the very reality in which they live. Outside the framework of the poem, viewed aesthetically, we see that Browning has demonstrated an important function of the artist, namely, that he helps to create the very reality in which his readers live, and that they too can share in this creative process.

However, this creative process can be abused. It can distort as well as order reality. When we meet the first speaker of The Ring and the Book, we see with what delight he misinterprets the facts in order to rationalize his own existence.

CHAPTER IV

HALF-ROME'S DELIGHT

1

Half-Rome is a voluble fellow and has gathered around him a group of passers-by--the group problably grows steadily as he talks--to whom he imparts his own commonplace deductions about the murder. Half-Rome wants his listeners to look him in the face and tell him if they actually think Guido is guilty. If the authorities "touch one hair of the five" then "There's an end of all hope of justice more." (II, 1475) He wants to know how such a thing can happen here in Rome, which is supposed to be the seat of honor, the center of "civility i' the world." If it does happen, he mourns, "Astraea's gone indeed, let hope go too!" (II, 1476) He sums up his basic argument with the question, "Who is it dares impugn the natural law?" (II, 1477) The natural law is God's law, in which man has the right to kill adulterous wives. Of course, Half-Rome says, the formality of law requires that Guido and his four assistants be tried, but once the formality is satisfied, it should end since the issue itself is clear enough. Are we to "Deny God's word 'the faithless wife shall die?'" (II, 1478)

Law, he suggests, is an imperfect instrument at best--a man-made thing--fit to serve when it is needed. But here is an issue which is higher than something that man has made. What's the good of law, he asks, in a case like this? (II, 1519-20) You call in the law when a "neighbor breaks your fence," steals from your field, "tampers with rent or lease," or when it concerns your "purse or pocket." But "wooes your wife?" The law is no good here; the law--man-made law--does not really apply. "No: take the old way trod when men were men!" (II, 1524) Guido tried the new way--the new, sophisticated way of society--and he got "Stuck in a quagmire." He went through the courts; he did all the things he was supposed to do; he cleared all the obstacles--judges, lawyers, paperwork--and he just "floundered worse and worse." And all he got for his pains was talk behind his back--the butt of jokes and whispers--as the shame of it all brought scandal and disgrace on his house and his good name. But he got back on the right road once more and "Revenged his own wrong like a gentleman." (II, 1529) Honor is, after all, a private matter. And if a gentleman's honor is called into question, nobody else can answer for that honor except the gentleman himself.

There is no doubt, Half-Rome admits, that Guido was somewhat over-zealous in making amends for his original mistake of placing too much faith in the courts, but this was simply a matter of a "natural over-energy" on Guido's part.

Thus the deed "yields three deaths instead of one." This is understandable and does not bother Half-Rome. Incredibly enough, he does not fail to point out that there is still "one life left." For where, he asks, looking around, is "the Canon's corpse?" The implication here is that since Guido did get carried away, he might as well have gone ahead and taken care of Caponsacchi while he was about it, and thus have wiped the slate clean.

Be frank, he tells his ever-growing audience. All of this might be the worse for Guido, but it is "The better for you and me and all the world." (II, 1538) It is the better for all "husbands of wives, especially in Rome." It is good that the whole thing "is put right" again here in Rome, "the old place" where the old values originated and are still in force. "Ay," he says, "the rod hangs on its nail behind the door," and husbands and gentlemen are required to use that rod from time to time if they are to be men. This is a point, he adds, that he wants especially to call to the notice "Of a certain what's-his-name" who has been "Somewhat too civil" in his attentions as he loiters "About a house here, where I keep a wife." (II, 1545-46) Then he eyes one of the group of listeners and suggests that "You, being his cousin, may go tell him so." (II, 1547)

The reader thus learns that behind all Half-Rome's assertions lies the psychological identification which Half-Rome has made with Guido's plight. Half-Rome has, in fact,

created a world of values in which Guido's actions can be explained and justified. He uses his creative abilities because of his own psychological need to rationalize the problems which exist between himself and his wife. Out of the rumors about the murder, mixed with what few facts he has, he artistically constructs a version of the murder that fits more closely with the way he thinks things ought to be--that is, as he says, if Rome and all that Rome supposedly stands for, is still to mean anything. Instead of using his artistic ability to get at the truth and to achieve some sense of personal fulfillment, as Caponsacchi, Pompilia and the Pope do, he uses it to construct an elaborate rationalization for his own failings as a man and as a husband. Caponsacchi, the real man in the story, is Half-Rome's villain; Guido is the hero who, saddled with tremendously burdensome problems, finally throws off the yoke of disloyalty, adultery, faithlessness, scandal, disgrace and ruin and washes his name and his honor clean in the blood of those who had wronged him. His only mistake, says Half-Rome, was in not doing it sooner.

2

Browning has already told us that Half-Rome will function as the "Gossip in a public place," (I, 865) but the latter's opinions become more than just a matter of what half of the people of Rome think about the murder. If all people have the ability to create for themselves aspects of the reality that they live in, then it becomes very important to

know just how they go about exercising this ability and for what ends.

It is obvious that Half-Rome has no interest in the moral issues of the murder.[1] The fact that three people were brutally stabbed to death (or near death, as in Pompilia's case) seems to have little effect on him; his ethical concepts are not tied up with the right and wrong of murder but with historical stereotypes such as "honor," "the gentlemanly code," and the like; he speaks of a world in which men can be men; he makes a case for this world by asserting that it is the "old way"--the suggestion is that it received its divine or natural sanction long ago in man's history; that at the base of the real world are these romantic concepts which have an ineffable sense of rightness about them; that these qualities are at the center of man's true civilization; that society now has become too effeminate, too spineless, too weak; that the machinery we have set up--legal, ecclesiastical and otherwise--is of value only when the good, old natural laws are not points at issue; that we don't need a lot of legal machinery to help spell out the natural laws--these laws are clear enough and we know when they are being applied and when they are being mis-applied. Society endangers the very values which are at its foundation when it becomes too nicely structured.

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[1]See Park Honan, Browning's Characters, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 181.

For society, when it becomes too civilized, too sophisticated, too artificial, only stands in the way of one's acting on the true principles that one feels in the deepest part of himself. Half-Rome does not speak of any specific golden age. Since he is of a superficial turn of mind, with a shallowness of insight which, of all the principals in The Ring and the Book, can only be compared to Guido's lawyer, Arcangeli, his feelings about this world at first seem trite, repetitious and commonplace.

He vaguely attempts to identify some of the concrete entities that go to make up such a world, but the best he can do is to mention God's law, a Rome of the old days, a time when men were men, a tradition of honor that all true gentlemen instantly recognize: these vague stereotypes seem at first to be all he is artistically capable of. As he speaks to his audience, however, he warms to his task. He has a minimum of facts about the case, but he has heard many rumors. Reversing the artistic process which Browning describes in Book I, Half-Rome regards the facts of the case as the alloy that he needs to make the rumors--his own fantasies about the case--strong and firm to file. He mixes his own fancy with the rumors, rather than with the facts; then he uses the few facts he has to give weight to his story. But he makes use of the facts in a curious way; he only engages them when they help round out the age of real tradition he speaks of "when men were men." Thus Guido did indeed, with

four henchmen, murder Pompilia and her parents. This is a fact no one can dispute. Half-Rome does not attempt to minimize the lurid aspects of the murder itself. Under the terms of the Rome of a "golden age" which he has vaguely formulated, he takes pleasure in emphasizing the physical details of the murder, because Pietro and Violante can serve as an example to others that this is what will happen to them if they violate the natural laws. Half-Rome uses the fact of the murder with a kind of vindictive self-righteousness to drive his point home. He goes to some artistic and rhetorical pains in the opening lines of his monologue to give graphic details of the condition of the corpses of Pietro and Violante. (II, 23-34) He derives enjoyment a little later as he describes the kind of knife used in the stabbings. (II, 142-51) His casual, detached, careless attitude toward the brutality involved is obviously the result of his own insensibilities to the human feelings that are part of the case. His artistic abilities are used to circumvent, rather than understand or extend, the reality which Pompilia and Caponsacchi have strived so hard to sustain and half-create. He does not see that in order to restore this old world of tradition that he speaks of--this stable order of values where men unerringly know what to do when their code has been violated, and then go out and do it--he does not see that it takes men of courage to do this, and that they are the very men who establish the laws he so condemns. He

tries to make a case for Guido by maintaining that Guido asserted his own natural rights and performed the only way he knew how--in the way of a man of honor and a gentleman; that Rome is a better place because of Guido's actions. The values of courage, conviction, sacrifice, love--all those values which would necessarily have to accompany Half-Rome's world of tradition--values which have traditionally been associated with the so-called man of honor--Half-Rome cannot make a case for, since he knows unconsciously that it is not Guido, but Caponsacchi, who has demonstrated these qualities in action. Half-Rome is limited by Guido; Guido does not leave him much room for extending his world of the man of honor. Half-Rome succeeds in creating out of limited materials, but his creation can hardly be regarded as an artistic success. Once we, as readers, grant him his materials and his donnee, we then judge his execution of those materials; Half-Rome's execution is not good, because he refuses to employ his materials accurately. His story tells us much about himself, but it tells us little about the important aspects of reality or experience, except in a distorted and embarrassing way.

3

Half-Rome speaks without much genuine information upon the day after the murder, January 3, 1698, while the bodies of the Comparini lie on display in the Church of San

Lorenzo. He is standing outside the church and represents the man of the street arguing about the city's most recent cause célèbre. The physical details of the setting are interesting and, in retrospect, assume an importance as we discern Half-Rome's artistic intentions. The situation that he creates can be compared mock-heroically to Antony's in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, when Antony delivers his famous polemic while Caesar lies dead on the Forum steps. Just as Antony distorts the situation when he speaks of "honorable men" so too does Half-Rome develop his own ideas about honor, using the situation itself as a point of departure whereby he can further his own ends. The reader does not discover what these ends are until the last lines of Half-Rome's monologue when we note that here is a painfully self-conscious and sometimes vulgar member of the lower middle-class whose wife is suspected of having an affair with a "certain what's-his-name" and that the latter might get the same treatment the Comparini received if he does not stay away from their house. It is also here that we understand why Half-Rome suggests that Guido left one stone unturned when he did not murder Caponsacchi at the same time that he murdered Pompilia and her parents. For Half-Rome's purposes, his wife's supposed lover and Caponsacchi have treaded the same dangerous waters and thus ought to receive the same punishment. Banishment is not punishment enough for Caponsacchi, nor would it be enough for the "jackanapes" who

has been courting his wife.

The combination stage melodrama, painting, and epic poem that Half-Rome clumsily attempts to create carries its own artistic downfall. It is a cumbersome vehicle at best. Although it might satisfy Half-Rome's immediate psychological need of compensating for his own failures as a man and a husband, it cannot give him more lasting satisfactions since it distorts the very experiences of the murder which he has taken pains to insist are the true ones. As a result, it does not extend his understanding of the nature of reality and, on psychological grounds (grounds that interested Browning to the extent that no other grounds did) this can only blunt his own chances for any sort of personal fulfillment. He seeks fulfillment instead, in fantasy and old myths about gentlemanly codes and a Rome of the past.

Half-Rome's stereotyped world of honor is based on a false assumption. He assumes, with only scraps of evidence, that Pompilia and Caponsacchi are guilty. On this false foundation he creates his world. He is not interested in considering the possibility of Pompilia's innocence, because once he does his creation dissolves; Guido becomes the villain and noblesse oblige is dead. The possibility of guilt seems beside the point to him. He obviously wants to believe certain things about human beings; he does not seem to respect people as individuals; it was only there, back in the old days, that men of honor could command respect; nowadays the world is full

of faithless wives and cowards and villains like Caponsacchi. The world he wants is one similar to the divine right of kings. The real heroics which Caponsacchi demonstrates that strong men are capable of he cannot recognize. He wants to believe that Pompilia is really a whore, just like his wife and like all women. He even suggests that Pompilia obtained her release from the convent in which she was placed after the first trial because of the intervention of new lovers whom she had in the meantime acquired. (II, 1332-33)

The further Half-Rome carries the arguments which are based on his false assumption, the more exaggerated his conclusions become. He carries them all to their logical, but insane, extreme. Thus, if Pompilia is promiscuous and sexually abandoned, then why stop at one lover? Thus, if Guido has the right, because of the natural law that says he defend his honor, to murder Pompilia, then why not Pietro and Violante at the same time? And why is not Caponsacchi's body lying alongside their corpses right at this moment? And why was not Pompilia strangled when she was a baby so that all this disgraceful business could have been avoided? (II, 235) And while we are thinking about it, strangle Violante too, so she cannot cause any more mischief by finding yet another helpless waif from some dying prostitute. (II, 246)

Half-Rome's absurdities become vicious and cruel and even insane as his artistry gathers momentum and he begins to realize all the possibilities involved in the irrational,

fantastic world of *honoris causa*.

4

The Church of San Lorenzo, where the bodies lie, has been turned into a theatre (II, 51), Half-Rome says. People have been filing in and out all day. Some have "climbed up the columns," others have crammed into the organ-loft; women have fainted, fights have broken out; not only, he says, is all Rome "at the show" but it is a show where the people have been well paid for their pains. (II, 98) Many already had some acquaintance with the affair because of the trial the previous May, in which the whole scandal was laid bare and Guido revealed as a cuckold. Some are not in much sympathy with Guido, explains Half-Rome, because "The Count had lounged somewhat too long in Rome,/ Made himself cheap." And besides, Half-Rome shrewdly adds, the Count is still alive. For the purposes of the drama that Half-Rome says the public is busily creating, the story would be much better had Guido "considerately died." (II, 117)

Half-Rome is here confusing life and art--a major failing of his which is more apparent in the early stages of his monologue than it is toward the end where reality slowly obtrudes itself back upon his consciousness. The reality of the murder does not affect him; but the artistic possibilities interest him a great deal, and for the purposes of making his play more successful artistically, it would have been much better had Guido also been killed in the

melée of stabbings. Since this did not happen, Half-Rome will have to make do with the materials that are available to him. During it all, however, he has no desire to see the principals in the play as real human beings. They are figures whom he can manipulate and move on and off the stage as he so chooses.

One of the old men who had been to view the bodies earlier in the day had told Half-Rome that he had seen many bodies on display at the church, but, he says, "all was poor to this I live and see./ Here the world's wickedness seals up the sum." (II, 124-25) And then he adds ominously, "Antichrist's surely come and doomsday near." (II, 127) This grim prophecy by one of the neighborhood sages, whom Half-Rome sets up as someone who can speak with authority, fits well with Half-Rome's artistic maneuverings when he speaks yearningly at the end of his speech for a re-establishment of the old values before the "new" society renders us all helpless to cope with people like the Comparini.

Half-Rome's "epic" play includes some Biblical trappings as he identifies the heroes and villains of the piece. Caponsacchi is the "Lucifer/ I' the garden where Pompilia, Eve-like, lured/ Her Adam Guido to his fault and fall." (II, 167-70) With such over-simplification and easy generalizations--necessary to the artist's proper functioning--Half-Rome can effortlessly maintain that the "case could not well be simpler." (II, 183) We have got the main facts, he states

blandly, and it is possible to "follow the murder's maze from source to sea." (II, 184)

Half-Rome even argues, and rightly so, for the inevitability of the affair happening exactly the way it did happen. He has the artist's "feel" and the artistic perception needed to see that once on its track, nothing could have prevented the circumstances from falling together the way they did, and leading relentlessly to their tragic conclusion. "One sees indeed," he says, "Not only how all was and must have been,/ But cannot other than be to the end of time." (II, 186-87)

All these preliminaries merely serve as Half-Rome's prologue. Now that he has set the stage he is ready to launch into the first act. "Do you hold/ Guido was so prodigiously to blame?" (II, 188-89) he asks insinuatingly. "Here's a friend shall set you right,/ Let him but have the handsel of your ear." (II, 191-92)

5

The way Half-Rome tells it, the Comparini were once a gay couple of the "modest middle class," who lived the "accustomed life" in Rome. They had a good reputation and, being without children, they had an easy time of it. They were more than just well off since Pietro owned two houses and some land. The smaller house, where they lived infrequently, was in the Pauline district on the outskirts of the

city, and it was such privacy and seclusion, suggests Half-Rome, that would perhaps invite one's enemy to think of murder.

Their life was complicated, however, by the fact that Pietro's possessions were in "usufruct," a legal term meaning that if he did not produce an heir, his possessions would pass into the hands of strangers. Pietro never stopped hoping for an heir--a story, says Half-Rome, "always old and always new." (II, 214) And with what "trick," what "sleight of hand," Violante used to produce the child, "spite of her unpromising age," Pietro never discovered until too late. At that time it would have been "in the old fool's interest" had someone stepped in and strangled the baby and "throttled" Violante too, and saved "the old murdered fool" much anguish.

Then, when Pompilia was twelve, and with the Comparini's estate mysteriously dwindling, Violante decided to compound the original lie, to use a new trick "should reinforce the old." (II, 251) Half-Rome maintains that the Comparini's poverty was serious, and since Pietro was past sixty and too old to work, it was up to the wily Violante to cast about for some way to catch an even bigger fish. Thus, with his analogies working overtime, Half-Rome says the angler Violante, "with an angler's mercy for the bait," put the minnow Pompilia wriggling on the end of her hook and tossed her line into mid-stream. And then, with more accuracy than is characteristic of him, Half-Rome says that this twelve-year-

old girl, who was already grown, with "great eyes" and a "bounty of black hair/ And first crisp youth that tempts a jaded taste," was dangled in "the way of a certain man, who snapped." (II, 272-77)

6

His name was Count Guido Franceschini, an Aretine by birth, the head of "an old noble house," a house which was not, at that time, "over-rich," but then "you can't have everything." The point is, Half-Rome insists, Guido had the innate nobility; he was such a man "as riches rub against" and "Readily stick to." He has the natural right to the riches because it is something that is "Born in the blood." (II, 278-83)

Guido, "As such folks do," had come down to Rome as a young man to better his fortune. However, he was not successful. He served a cardinal, hoping that the latter would get him some lucrative preferment; but none ever came and Guido spent thirty years in Rome waiting for the doors to open to him. At the age of forty-six he decided to give it all up and make the best of his palace in Arezzo, where his widowed mother and his younger brother Girolamo lived in poverty.

It was in such a mood of "disappointed worth" that Guido, just prior to his planned departure, was seized upon by Violante. "Where was I," Half-Rome says, stopping for a

moment, "with that angler-simile?" (II, 322) Violante "threw her bait, Pompilia," and Guido took the hook because in this way he at least salvaged something from his wasted years in Rome. Besides, the new bride would be "light in the dark house, lend a look of youth" to the mother's face, now "famished with the emptiness of hope." (II, 331-33) "Such were the pinks and greys about the bait/ Persuaded Guido gulp down hook and all." (II, 341-43) Besides, Half-Rome insists, as he continues to interpret the action for his audience, the machinations of Violante brought about the marriage so fast and in such secrecy that Guido hardly knew what was happening and had no time even to protest. Moreover, Half-Rome erroneously concludes, Violante had to do this before Pietro found out what her intentions were. Pietro did not even know about the marriage, and Guido was given "no time for thinking twice"; the end result was that "Guido's broad back was saddled to bear all." (II, 390-91) As part of the marriage agreement, Pietro signed over his lands and possessions to Guido in return for a permanent membership in the Franceschini household for himself and Violante. He also agreed to pay over a dowry for Pompilia.

It is obvious, Half-Rome points out with a certain degree of accuracy, that Pietro and Violante were social climbers and it was their own fault if they expected more of the Arezzo household than they found. They already had a preconceived notion of the luxuriousness of aristocratic

living and they were going to exploit their desires to their fullest once they were established in Arezzo. Guido hoped that times would better themselves if he carefully managed the household budget. But things went from bad to worse. Pietro and Violante were shocked at conditions in Arezzo, hated the widow Donna Beatrice and the greedy younger brother, the priest Girolamo.

For three months life was unbearable for all concerned. It was "Dog-snap and cat-claw, curse and counterblast." (II, 505) Pietro began going down to the center of town, complaining loudly to his barroom cronies, "trumpeting huge wrongs/ At church and market-place." (II, 507-08) Violante did the same with her own friends, "In whatsoever pair of ears would perk." Naturally, Half-Rome rightly concludes, the common people of Arezzo loved this story of an impoverished nobleman's domestic problems laid bare at the same time that he was trying to keep up appearances. In the meantime, after three months, Violante and Pietro returned to Rome in anger and bitterness.

While at first glance it might seem that Guido was better off with the Comparini's departure, Violante was still able to do him harm. Once back in Rome, she took advantage of the Pope's Jubilee to confess something that had been on her conscience for twelve years. Half-Rome says this laughingly and then asks: Why now would she confess the truth about Pompilia's illegitimacy except for the obvious fact that once

it was proved that Pompilia was not the legitimate heir of the Comparini, then the agreement to transfer lands and possessions to Guido would be void.

Guido protested vigorously to this confession, not, Half-Rome says, because he would lose his recently acquired wealth, but because he did not want it even suggested that the wife he loved and respected was of a low and common--even bestial--heritage. Furthermore, Guido, in spite of the disgrace which had by now been made public, did not attempt to take his revenge out on Pompilia. No, Half-Rome says, "birth and breeding, and compassion too/ Saved her such scandal." (II, 639-40) In fact, Pompilia championed Guido's cause at first, wrote a letter to Guido's brother in Rome, the Abate Paolo, in which she said that her previous complaints were all part of her parents' promptings, that they had devised a plan whereby she was to come to Rome later, after she had found some handsome and daredevil companion to assist her. She was, she says, supposed to poison Guido, steal all his valuables, set fire to the house, and leave.

7

Now, Half-Rome knowingly asks, how can you deny such facts? "God knows I'll not prejudge the case," (II, 680) he says blandly, but these things are "Fact," and "not a dream of the devil, Sir!" Moreover, it is "a fact none dare dispute." We have the proof, "Word for word, such a letter

did she write." (II, 720-21) Half-Rome does not bother to speculate about the possibility that the letter might be a forgery. The letter is a fact because **she** wrote it, and the Abate Paolo published it as part of a public proclamation in Rome, and everybody knew about it. (II, 722-25)

And what did the courts do? he asks. They did what they always do--they gave a compromise decision. They allowed Guido the dowry but denied him Pietro's possessions. "Thus was justice ever ridiculed" in this city where "double verdicts" are in such favor, where both parties go home unhappy.

In the midst of appeals and counterappeals Pompilia began to grow restless and bored. Who turns up in a trice, says Half-Rome sarcastically, but that man with the halo around his head, a fop with curls around his tonsure, the "all-consoling Caponsacchi"; and what else should a consoler be but a priest, even though he is tall, well-built and handsome? Too, he is a priest "Nowise exorbitantly overworked" and in fact a "courtly Christian" sending his "god-glance" out "while the snake/ Pompilia writhed transfixed through all her spires." (II, 794-95)

Though Caponsacchi was not an acquaintance at Guido's house, he was in "prime request/ With the magnates of Arezzo." He met her in a rather curious way; Half-Rome describes it as a time when he was on some "weighty business" while he found his steps/ Incline to a certain haunt of doubtful

fame," which happened to be close to Guido's palace, and dangerously near Pompilia's window.

Guido, the responsible head of a failing house, ever busy trying to save the estate, his mind and attention weighed down by care, suddenly realized that something was wrong. "Friends, there's falseness here," he cried, but his friends at first made light of his suspicions and accused him of an early senility.

When the escape finally came, after weeks of Pompilia's embarrassing behavior concerning her trips to the Bishop and the governor to complain about her marriage, Guido shook off his cares and pursuing the lovers, he rode them down. And, Half-Rome says, one of the reasons he caught up with them at Castelnuovo was because they had taken time out to spend the night together in the inn and give satisfaction to their desires.

Guido, Half-Rome points out, does not kill them here in the middle of this drama. No, being the gentleman that he is, he is only ashamed for them. It is no honor for him to avenge the wrong that has been done to him. Instead, he has them placed in jail in Rome and desires to prove himself in the courts of Roman justice. And as the case goes on and becomes more tangled, all the Court can say is "'Let each side own its fault and make amends!'" (II, 1172) One is banished into exile at Civita, to protect him from his own waywardness; the other is placed in

a convent where she will get the love and warmth she craves. And the husband? Well, says the Court, if his tale proves true, then he is rid of "two domestic plagues" and we lift a "double load" from his breast. (II, 1204-08)

8

Half-Rome mixes fact and fancy with a freedom that Browning never claimed for the artist in the first book of the poem. He assumes what must have happened when Guido returned to Arezzo, as good as beaten in his usufruct case. Guido found "no heaven/ I' the house when he returned there." His welcome by the people was an upside-down affair as he was greeted "In a chorus of inquiry." No sooner was he back than he was met with "'What, back--you?/ And no wife?" (II, 1239-40) Well, they understood, but beneath their questions were the innuendoes about that "madcap Caponsacchi" who was "fired up," and showed "fight and skill of fence?/ Ay, you drew also, but you did not fight!" Of course, it was wiser not to fight. They nod their heads, but they do not believe it. And did not "'the little lady menace you'" when she drew your own "'harmless sword'" and pointed it at your chest? "'The spitfire!'" Well, at least you got home safe and sound, and at least you have kept the "'sixth commandment whether or no/ The lady broke the seventh.'" And then Half-Rome's imaginary speaker at Arezzo adds, "'I only wish/ I were as saint-like, contain me so.'" But, the speaker continues, "' I am a sinner, I fear I should have left/ Sir Priest no nosetip to turn up

at me!'" (II, 1252-59)

Now how could anyone take this kind of baiting? Half-Rome asks. It was enough "to make a wise man mad." Then Half-Rome, implying it all along, subtly turns his play into a courtroom drama as he tells his listeners, "Oh, but I'll have your verdict at the end!" (II, 1263)

Well, Half-Rome continues, this was "not enough it seems." The Comparini kept pouring salt on the wounds, "drop by drop." Guido, arguing on the grounds that since his wife was sent to the convent as punishment, what else could the punishment be for but adultery? Thus he sued for divorce on these grounds in the Roman courts. Pompilia promptly filed a countersuit, making outrageous charges, "hints of worse than hate," stories of how Guido's brother Girolamo had attempted to seduce her with Guido in full consent and with the mother's prompting. This, now, was a "bolt" in Guido's breast. But he "bore up, giddily perhaps," dizzy from this rain of treachery, and he rallied with his brother in Rome--the Abate Paolo--and "joined battle in the public courts." Then more deceit, as Pompilia was released from the convent after only three short weeks, to go live again with her parents, the very people who had renounced her. And they renounced her just so they could rob Guido. This time they took her to their hiding-place--their second and smaller house in the Pauline district--away from the heart of Rome, thus making it easier for Caponsacchi to

steal down from Civita to see her.

And then the final blow, "Hell's quintessence," the last drop poured on the wound: Pompilia gave birth to Guido's son and heir, "Or Guido's heir and Caponsacchi's son." (II, 1384)

Half-Rome stands dramatically before his audience, letting his rhetorical pause sink in. Then he says to them, "I want your word now: what do you say to this?" What did great Rome and little Arezzo say, and what did God say and the devil say as they poured things into Guido's ear? Why, it was too much for Guido as it would be too much for anybody. "Why, the overburdened mind/ Broke down, what was a brain became a blaze." (II, 1390) In the fury of the moment, Count Guido gathered "four hard hands and stout hearts" from his fields and went immediately to the Comparini villa in Rome. Once there, Guido decided to give Pompilia one last chance. He planned to call out a name and if Pompilia did not answer, he would know that she was innocent. "'Who is it knocks?' cried one." And with the answer went Pompilia's last hope. "'Guiseppe Caponsacchi!' Guido cried;/ And open flew the door." (II, 1431-32)

And that was enough. "Vengeance, you know," says Half-Rome, "burst, like a mountain-wave" throughout the house, "And wiped its filthy four walls free again/ With a wash of hell-fire." (II, 1433-36) Guido "killed them all, bathed his name clean in their blood." (II, 1437)

Thus it was, says Half-Rome, and it all happened just yesterday.

9

So here they lie, Half-Rome says, apparently gesturing to the bodies of Pietro and Violante, "hacked to pieces." One expert said he had never seen "so thorough study of stabbing." And Pompilia, "very difficult to slay," continues to writhe "viper-like" at a hospital near by. Caponsacchi will be called back to testify. After all, he is the "hero of the adventure," Half-Rome says sarcastically. (II, 1452) And Guido? What of his fate? He is no doubt a "most unromantic spouse." But the people in both Rome and Arezzo who had formerly snickered about the scandal are no longer laughing now. Guido "gave the broad farce an all too brutal air." (II, 1461)

Half-Rome suggests to his listeners that it was up to Guido to tell the others when playtime was over. Guido is a man of honor, not some mindless, cuckolded buffoon. His primary mistake was when he did not kill them when he first caught up with them during their flight from Arezzo. That was the time, when he had them in <u>flagrante delicto</u>. The natural law implies that you kill them when you catch them. He could have used the incriminating letters that he found as further justification for his killing. If he had done this, Half-Rome insists, the world would have "praised the man. But no!/ That were too plain, too straight, too

simply just!" (II, 1503-04) Guido was a gentleman and he wanted to carry it out the right way.

And what was Law's reaction? Why they told him that if he could not have taken it seriously enough to have done something about it at the time, how can he expect them to take action later? Law is "alien to the actor whose warm blood/ Asks heat from law whose veins run lukewarm milk." (II, 1515-15)

And thus the curtain closes on Half-Rome's incredible drama--a drama in which little is seen clearly, in which absurd premises are carried to logical but insane conclusions; it is a drama in which none of the real issues are laid bare, none of the deepest feelings are recognized. Guido is an innocent Adam, hard at work in his Eden-like gardens at Arezzo, "among his vines, it seems," (II, 1392) and Pompilia is the Eve who lures him, and he is led unsuspectingly into the morass of treachery and deceit, as Pompilia wriggles serpent-like in front of him. Caponsacchi is the Lucifer arch-villain, who uses the cloak of the Church to conceal his evil nature. The only regret is that Guido did not kill him too.

Rome is a better place for it, Half-Rome insists. Guido has reminded all of us, particularly if we are husbands, that we have obligations if we are to be men and if we believe in honor. But, though Half-Rome reminds the cousin of his wife's supposed lover that something similar

to the fate of the Comparini family might happen to that "certain what's-his-name," the reader suspects that while Half-Rome is standing by the church talking with such bluster, his wife has not failed to take advantage of her husband's lengthy absence from home.

CHAPTER V

THE OTHER WORLD OF OTHER HALF-ROME

1

The Other Half-Rome is a straightforward character whose mind tends to run along conventional channels. His personality has long been categorized--a melancholy, lonely bachelor who romanticizes the murder case and the principals in it into a different kind of world than the normative one which Browning will so carefully establish in the poem.

Since exaggerated truths are perhaps not so far removed from reality as exaggerated lies, Other Half-Rome's version of the murder is more accurate than Half-Rome's, but the former's monologue has fewer psychological ramifications. For one thing, it is not necessary for Other Half-Rome to rationalize his own inadequacies. Although a vague sense of a fin de siecle weakness is diffused throughout the monologue, there is very little personal reference and indeed, there need not be, since it is not necessary for Other Half-Rome to talk personally about himself; he is not interested primarily in the pedestrian world in which he spends his practical life. He is more taken up with the constructs of the world of the "romance-books"; perhaps

because of this, Other Half-Rome's monologue does not contain the deadly logic of Half-Rome's; it also suggests that Other Half-Rome is lacking in a personal sense of identity. Unable to assert himself as an individual in the real world, he uses his imaginative abilities to people a world where individuality is possible.

The reader is inclined to grant Other Half-Rome some of his premises, and as we follow him in his version of the case, it is no accident that he is not able to carry his arguments to sensible conclusions. Just as Half-Rome's original premise is false, yet all his conclusions are wildly logical, so Other Half-Rome's premises are true, but his responses to them are exaggerated in order for him to sketch out a picture of the romantic world of grand dame, melodramatic heroics, and other-worldly love, that so fascinates him and to which he devotes most of his creative energies. Since his world centers around a basic ideal, Other Half-Rome, instead of approaching the facts with logic, inevitably has to rely on absolutes to talk persuasively for his version of the case. As a result, there is little development in the picture he gives us; it is the same exotic world at the end as it was at the beginning; he rounds it out for us, we learn more and more about it, but it is essentially a finished product when the monologue begins.

To be sure, the murder case has all the ingredients and flavor one would need to create--in writing or painting--

an exciting, mysterious romance. It is all here: the illegitimacy, the plotting, the secret marriage, the mystery of a nobleman who is protecting a rotting castle, the dark-eyed, black-haired heroine, the handsome, reckless, courageous hero, the greedy parents, the perverted brother, the inheritance of property and possessions, the imprisonment in her own house of the wife, the flight of the lovers, the court case, full of recriminations from both sides, the convent, the birth of the baby, and finally a triple murder--with the murderers caught soaked in blood--on the day after New Year's. Here is material for the meanest of artists--plots and counterplots--action and passion of the wildest and most adventurous kind. Here is where life's meaning is, in this world of courage and treachery, intrigue and mystery, love and hate. This is where things are happening, where one can see his heroes and heroines plainly as they reach for that heaven seemingly beyong their grasp--reach for it and get it.

Other Half-Rome calls this the world of the "common light and air and life of man" (XII, 1694) at the end of his monologue, but it is difficult here to reconcile his exotic fantasy world with this "common light" of the real world as the plot comes slowly down to earth again and the murder takes on a more commonplace aspect.

2

Other Half-Rome begins his monologue with some

introductory comments which indicate that his intention is to idealize Pompilia. He then touches on the problem that Pietro and Violante had faced seventeen years earlier when they had no heir. He describes the first twelve years of Pompilia's life as being happy ones, even though they were based on a lie. Then he passes on to his version of how Guido's brother, the Abate Paolo, came to call on Violante and begin the negotiations for the marriage. Violante was excited by the possibility of her daughter's marrying into the nobility. Pietro inquired among his friends about Guido's reputation and discovered that Guido was a tattered, impoverished, and sycophantic nobleman and his friends could only laugh when they heard Pietro's news. Upon learning this, Pietro could not tolerate the idea of the marriage, and he thought Violante agreed with him. But Violante arranged a secret marriage and told Pietro about it later and succeeded in appeasing him after he got over his first anger.

Other Half-Rome then discusses the terms of the dowry, and the transfer of Pietro's holdings. From there he moves to the Comparini's four-month stay at Arezzo, Violante's confession during the Pope's jubilee, the suit filed in Rome by the Comparini, in which the Comparini claimed legal right to the possessions (which they had previously signed over to Guido) since they now admitted that Pompilia was not their legitimate heir. Then Other

Half-Rome describes Guido's countersuit and the Court's compromise decision. The Court had ruled that Pompilia was indeed illegitimate, yet ruled that Guido keep the dowry but give Pietro back his possessions. Both sides immediately appealed. Pietro argued that if the Court ruled that Pompilia was not his child, then he ought to get the dowry back. Guido maintained that if he had a right to the dowry, he had a right to all. The Court ordered a reinvestigation of the whole case and there, adds Other Half-Rome, the matter stood right up to this day.

The entire business filled Guido with much hatred and the one person around upon whom he could expend his hate was Pompilia. He hoped that, if he goaded her enough, she would break out in full rebellion. Guido forged a letter supposed to be written by Pompilia in which she admitted that her parents urged her to plot against the Franceschini and escape. This letter was sent to Paolo, who publicized it widely in the hopes that the Courts would reverse their decision.

Pompilia was almost a prisoner in her own house, Other Half-Rome says. On two occasions she managed to get away long enough to appeal to the Governor and the Archbishop, but they were old friends of the Count's family. She then tried a simple friar who, after some deliberation, decided against helping her because he feared the punishment Guido might mete out to him. Then she went to Guido's jolly cousin,

Canon Conti, who suggested that she appeal to his brother-priest, Guiseppe Caponsacchi, and it was he who ultimately helped her escape.

It was a daring flight, Other Half-Rome says, and it was only because of Pompilia's complete exhaustion that the two of them ever stopped at Castelnuovo, only four hours from Rome. There the murderous Guido overtook them and there Pompilia summoned strength to strike back at Guido with his own sword; after the Courts made their decision and banished Caponsacchi to Civita and placed Pompilia in a convent, it was Guido who could not rest. He heard from his brother Paolo that Pompilia had given birth to Guido's son and heir. At that time Paolo told Guido that he would conveniently be out of town so that Guido could do what he had to do. Guido got four of his henchmen and went to Rome where they remained in hiding at a villa of his brother for a few days until they knew the daily routine of the Comparini family. Then, on January 2nd, they murdered them all.

The Other Half-Rome ends his monologue with some comments on law and Guido. It is hardly necessary, he states, to "ask what Count Guido says," (III, 1642) since he has to say something. The fact that Guido admits the deed means nothing, since he could hardly have admitted anything else. And for Guido to claim that his crime was "just and inevitable," because it was more important to him

to save his honor instead of his life, becomes absurd when we realize that the three people who were murdered were not guilty of anything.

No, Other Half-Rome argues, Guido brought it on himself. It was his own deceit and trickery that got him into the trouble and now he is attempting to put on the face of a man of honor and is trying to exercise a "husband's rights." (III, 1649)

3

Cook has pointed out some minor discrepancies concerning the exact day on which Other Half-Rome speaks, but the most consistent date seems to be January 5th, three days after the murder.[1] He is speaking in the Barberini Plaza in the heart of Rome. Browning, in his summaries of Books Two and Three, compares the two speakers' attitudes towards the murder case. (I, 847-58, 883-92)[2] Both the speakers, says Browning, are honest enough, in a sense, but both are led astray "by a prepossession," a fit of fancy--the implication is that their artistic abilities are turned inwardly upon themselves--and that this tends to neutralize their honesty and brings "unsuccess" to their attempts at getting at the truth. Browning goes on to suggest that

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[1]A. K. Cook, A Commentary Upon Browning's "The Ring and the Book" (London: Oxford University Press, 1920), p. 53. Hereafter cited as Commentary.

[2]Cited in Cook, p. 53, f.n.1.

while it might be correct to say that the second speaker is closer to the truth than the first, this was a matter of luck on his part, rather than skill. What Browning means here, of course, is that Other Half-Rome happens to be on the right side. He is simply lucky because his distorted view of reality--in which the world is regarded on one level as a romantic possibility and on another as a commonplace fact with no bridge between the two--happens to coincide with the truths of the murder as the reader comes to know them through Caponsacchi, Pompilia, and the Pope.

A proposition discussed at length later on in this thesis, and one upon which most recent Ring criticism tends to agree, is that the "truths" of the murder case are intellectually presented--quite plainly and with no attempt at beguiling us--by Browning in the first book of the poem. Then these truths are emotionally discovered by us only after we have been exposed to the "facts" of the murder. That is, we are required to experience them just as the principals did; thus the truths that we already know intellectually--we have no reason to distrust Browning--we resolve emotionally. But we are only able to do this after submitting ourselves to the empirical situation, just as Browning himself did. Only in this way can we offer our own insights toward the murder and only in this way can we extend and even help to create reality for ourselves.

Other Half-Rome, unfortunately, does not do this. It

is not that Other Half-Rome does not see clearly the situation and weigh the facts carefully; indeed, he does. However, unlike Pompilia and Caponsacchi, Other Half-Rome refines his insights to a point where they cannot be assimilated into his own everyday world. He is not able to accommodate them except in his world of romance. Thus, he cannot say, as Pompilia does, that he has helped to create his own values and that he has helped to formulate and realize his own goals. He cannot say, as Caponsacchi does to the judges, that it is not for the sake of the principals in the murder that he is arguing his version of the case, but for the sake of his listeners. Caponsacchi is not appearing before the judges in his own behalf or in Pompilia's. They are both out of it, he says. His function as amicus curiae is more than just a practical one, and Caponsacchi is aware of the symbolic significance of the term. Caponsacchi wants to show the judges the "truth," not for his own sake, or Pompilia's sake, but for the sake of the judges themselves.

Caponsacchi is thus aware of his own ability to re-order the objects of his reality; Other Half-Rome is not. The latter has the ability--or at least the capability--and Browning would insist that all people do. The language that we use, and its metaphorical basis, is evidence enough that this capability exists, regardless of what one might wish to call it. Browning believes it is of great significance but that it can be distorted and misused.

Other Half-Rome cannot "see" reality, so dazzled is he by his own extravagant fictions. He cannot "see" the ring Browning asks us to see in the first line of the poem. He must take all the principals in the story and set them outside reality. Only then can he participate creatively in their experience. Unlike Caponsacchi and Pompilia, Other Half-Rome cannot ground his romance in the empirical data which confront him.

In contrast, Caponsacchi argues powerfully and eloquently for action. One can do nothing, he tells the judges, unless one acts. One cannot extend his reality unless he participates in it. Other Half-Rome does not do this. Thus, as Browning suggests, his honesty is neutralized by his own vision, and he gets by on luck rather than skill, as romantics--perennial optimists--always seem to do.

4

Various passages in Park Honan's book, Browning's Characters, deal successfully with Other Half-Rome's attitudes. However, Honan tries to make a case for Other Half-Rome's personal identity. Since the thesis of his book is that the imagery, diction and sound in Browning's dramatic monologues tend to reveal the personality of the speaker, it is natural that Honan would try to make a case for Other Half-Rome's individuality. But there is little evidence to support this;

the evidence generally points to Other Half-Rome's lack of individuality. His own personality is not felt as strongly as that of Half-Rome's. How could it be, since he has placed the drama in a different context altogether, where his own personality would only be obtrusive?

But Honan has gathered strong evidence to point up some of Other Half-Rome's attitudes and show that they are at the base of his other world. Honan notes that in the animal imagery Other Half-Rome uses, he sees things in black and white. Pompilia is seen approvingly as a "snow-white chick" (III, 65), a lamb, a bird, a dove. Guido, in contrast, is "a lion, fox, worm, ferret, uncaged beast, wolf-in-sheepskin, scorpion, wildcat, dog, and hawk."[1] These images indicate simple divisions of black and white for Other Half-Rome. Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and Guido "are seen indistinctly through an emotional curtain that simplifies all matters." Other Half-Rome is thus a man "who is at the mercy of his own prejudices, who lacks objectivity and discernment." The fact that he discovers Guido's guilt and Pompilia's innocence is accidental.[2]

Honan notes that Other Half-Rome "uses six colors extensively, black, white, red, blue, purple, and silver." The first three are the colors used most often and they are "almost invariable associated with Guido, Pompilia, and

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[1]Honan, p. 182. [2]Ibid.

Caponsacchi respectively."[1] Such a simple association seems to point to the fact that Other Half-Rome views experience much too simply to be able to understand it. On the other hand, Other Half-Rome is obviously a more refined speaker than Half-Rome. Although he creates his own fantasy world, Other Half-Rome tends to be reflective. Even though he has what Honan calls a "sentimental preoccupation" with the facts, he nevertheless talks about these facts "with a certain delicacy that his counterpart does not manifest or possess." His imagery, though simple, is artistic. While he sees Guido as the villain in a sentimental melodrama, he "echoes the wolf-imagery of Book I. . .and for the wrong reasons, sometimes expresses Browning's opinion of Guido's character."[2]

But Other Half-Rome does not seem as dynamic as Half-Rome. His simple use of colors, besides indicating his attitudes toward the three principals, also indicates his essentially colorless personality. His own life is hardly worth talking about. His make-believe world is what interests him; it is his reality, the result of his artistic abilities. It is a world pregnant with meaning, purpose and fulfillment. Unfortunately, Other Half-Rome is not in it himself. Thus, he does not really extend his own vision or re-shape it and his romantic maunderings can tell him nothing new about

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[1] Ibid. [2] Ibid., p. 296.

himself.

5

Other Half-Rome creates his own interesting side-lights concerning the actual murder. The way he sees it, when Guido was tapping at the door of the Comparini villa in the Pauline district, the fact that the door was opened immediately after Guido disguised his voice and said he was Caponsacchi, proves the exact reverse of what Guido claims it proved. After all, Other Half-Rome argues, if Caponsacchi were a frequent visitor at the Pauline villa (sneaking down from his place of exile in Civita), then Pompilia would have known that the person at the door could not have been Caponsacchi, because, Other Half-Rome says melodramatically, "Stealthy guests/ Have secret watchwords, private entrances." (III, 1611-12)

Thus even when he is denying Guido's charges, Other Half-Rome must speak in a hushed voice about passwords and secret passageways. When he describes the murderers' escape from the villa, he adds many emotional touches of his own. Thus Guido and his henchmen "Reeled. . .like drunkards along open road" and later arrived at the village of Baccano and "Stumbled at least, dear, dumb, blind. . ./ Into a grange and, one dead heap, slept there." (III, 1632-36) When their pursuers caught up with them, they found Guido and his men "red from head to heel"--an exaggeration that only

Other Half-Rome could find useful for his purposes.

Other Half-Rome also makes much of Pompilia's motherhood. The reason, he says, she fled from the palace of Arezzo was because she was "one month gone with child." (III, 1527) It does not matter if Pompilia actually knew she was pregnant or not. Either way, we can see that she fled because of "The strong and passionate precipitance/ of maiden startled into motherhood." (III, 1530-31) This is the way doctors have always accounted for the mystery of motherhood--it "changes body and soul by nature's law." (III, 1532)

Other Half-Rome is frequently guilty of this kind of extravagance. The suggestion was made earlier that occasionally he does well by his method. For example, when Guido first hears the news from his brother Paolo that Pompilia is pregnant and has moved out of the convent, Other Half-Rome describes Guido's reaction with powerful artistry. Guido, in "the blue of a sudden sulphur-blaze" saw "the ins and outs to the heart of hell." (III, 1570, 73)

But, only too frequently, Other Half-Rome is preoccupied with isolating and romanticizing the entire situation; thus he forces himself into the position of the romancer who must separate the absolute good from the absolute bad. Honan cites the passage which is the key to Other Half-Rome's concept of himself as the artist.[1] Other Half-Rome, as he

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[1]Ibid., p. 194.

discusses Caponsacchi's personality, is obliged to consider the possibility that Caponsacchi may have indeed tried to seduce Pompilia. After all, Other Half-Rome argues, "priests are merely flesh and blood." (III, 830) When we find weakness in a human being, but no guilt, then there can be no misfortune resulting from it. For, "finding grey,/ We gladly call that white which might be black." (III, 831-32) Here, in one sentence, Other Half-Rome not only exposes his own attitudes and his own lack of individuality as a human being; he also is describing his own artistic method and at the same time explaining the necessity for the romance-structured, "literary," pseudo-popular milieu that inevitably results from such a misapplication of his creative abilities.

Since he finds grey in the world of everyday experience--the ambiguous and uncertain "real" life that does not interest him--and since such grey does not meet his own romantic expectations--he is forced to turn his grey into either a black or a white. For his purposes, it is convenient to see Pompilia as his white figure and Guido as his black figure. He admits that were it real life, what we call white might be black or vice versa. But in the world he creates, one does not have to worry about such distinctions. He grants himself artistic license, attempts to justify it, and paints Pompilia a pure white and Guido a villainous black. The fact that he is correct in doing so is only

accidental.

Thus Other Half-Rome "arrives at the truth in the wrong way; and so exposes himself."[1] His method is the wrong way because it could just as easily call what was false true (or what was black white). It would depend upon how easily the real facts could be reduced to simplicities and be fitted into Other Half-Rome's already preconceived romance-fantasy view of experience.

Other Half-Rome can rhapsodize about his function as the artist who is going to find the truth. "How hold a light, display the cavern's gorge?/ How, in this phase of the affair, show truth?" These questions are pretentious and rhetorical since Other Half-Rome has already supplied himself with the answers. Even here, when discussing Pompilia's truth, it is not the truth that Pompilia herself discovers and extends into and out of herself right up to heaven. For Other Half-Rome, Pompilia is a truth, "All truth and only truth." Her presence is also "something else..../ Something that every lie expires before." (III, 800-02)

Other Half-Rome's own monologue contradicts this because in the figurative presence of Pompilia's whiteness and her purity, he only succeeds in making even stronger his own false view of reality.

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[1]Honan, p. 194.

CHAPTER VI

TERTIUM QUID: BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL

1

Tertium Quid, holding forth inside a fashionable Roman salon, maintains that the rabble have had too much to say about the murder. What we need to do, Quid tells his dignified listeners, is to lift the case "Out of the shade into the shine, allow/ Qualified persons" to "edge in an authoritative word/ Between the rabble's-brabble of dolts and fools." (IV, 7-10) Law, he says, will not do it. And if the rabble think that a legal trial is somehow going to set everything straight, they are mistaken. If Law were competent to take care of such matters, it would have done it three years ago, when the case first came up.

Quid laughs at the very idea, then associates himself with his listeners by insisting that he and the Excellency, "we and his Highness here/ Would settle the matter as sufficiently" as any lawyers or judges will ever do, with a "word and a wink" between us because we know that the ultimate arbiter will be the Cardinal, who is sitting over there half-listening while he gambles at cards. (IV, 49-55)

Then Quid addresses himself to another nobleman

present: "And here's the Marquis too!" (IV, 57) he says. One can imagine Quid standing in the midst of the card tables and salon chairs, casually walking about, equating his social status with his auditors, attempting to enlist their attention. He entreats his listeners to "Indulge me but a moment." I am, he says, favored with a powerful audience, and if I fail "To set things right, why, class me with the mob/ As understander of the mind of man!" (IV, 60-1)

Quid's sarcastic implication here, of course, is that the mob claims to understand what really happened during the murder, but without any basis for that understanding. Only in his class will there be found the people of intelligence who see that there can be no final understanding, no final solution to the case.

He relates the story of how the modest but comfortable Comparini couple lived; he describes Violante's machinations when, after they ultimately found themselves in debt and had to go on papal relief, she suddenly produced an heir. This, Quid instructs his listeners, was definitely a crime. Quid resembles a trial lawyer who is obliged to enlighten not only the jury, but the defense, prosecution and judge as well. When he speaks of Violante's deceit, he leaves little doubt--at least momentarily--as to how he regards her actions. "A crime complete in its way is here, I hope?" he asks rhetorically. (IV, 215) Violante's

lies were "Lies to God, lies to man, every way lies." (IV, 216) and not only did she rob the proper heirs when she turned up with Pompilia, she also robbed God.

"Is so far clear?" he pauses to ask his listeners. He feels that they know Violante now and that they can "compute her capability of crime." And hers was a "Black hard cold/ Crime like a stone you kick up with your foot/ I' the middle of a field." (IV, 229-31) At any rate, Quid tells them, "I thought as much" for a while. "But now," he says, "a question." And here is the first of a long series of instances where Quid pauses, discusses, equivocates, turns over the matter and examines it from the other side.

Consider it this way, he says. How long does that stone lie that you kicked up as you were walking through the field? As the years go by, that stone is certain to become covered with "moss, weed, wild-flower." (IV, 236) Quid turns and speaks to his Highness directly. Your Highness, he says, minds that are healthy tend to let bygones be bygones. They leave old crimes behind them and hope that those crimes can grow "virtuous-like" in the sun and air. This is the way time treats ugly deeds. In the case under discussion, Pietro was overjoyed to have an heir and even Violante's "old wicked heart" was softened. The crime itself actually began to resemble a virtue. Out of the "dungheap" a rose grew, a "pure child." There was

still a second virtue since she was rescued from the horror of being raised by her real mother. Why, if there are any moralists present, says Quid ironically, let them note that sin has saved a soul. (IV, 256)

In fact the best way of "unsinning sin/ Is to begin well-doing somehow else." (IV, 285-86) Pietro began this automatically; since he was so delighted to have an heir, he was a good father to Pompilia. Besides, he was not a party to Violante's crime anyway. It was Violante who was guilty of the "whole sin." So to her belonged "the exemplary penance." (IV, 300) She too was happy and an excellent mother to their foster child.

But Quid feels as though his audience can see a fallacy here. He flatters his distinguished auditors by telling them that they can get past his guard and thrust straight to his heart if they point out "'There's a lie at base of all,'" (IV, 306) that lie being the fact that the Comparini could never erase Pompilia's illegitimacy. However, like the pearl which is around the Principessa's neck, a thing that is worthless at the core is not necessarily worthless all over.

Now are you with me so far? he asks them. You can see at this point in the story who was right, who was wrong, and who was neither, can't you? "What, you don't?" (IV, 315) he says with mock-surprise. Well then, we must all admit "there's somewhat dark i' the case." But let's go on with

it and I promise you that it will all become clear.

Quid tells them what happened twelve years later when the Comparini married Pompilia off to Guido. The one desire of Pietro and Violante was to see Pompilia well-married. As a matter of fact, Quid points out, Pompilia would have been a good catch for someone from the burgess class. But instead Pompilia married the "real thing," the "truth and not the sham" and hence "ruin to them all." (IV, 354) Guido's situation was typical of many noble families who had been reduced to poverty, but in Guido's case the "poverty was getting too acute." (IV, 381) Guido got nowhere when he served Cardinal Nerli in Rome for so many years; then the Cardinal rewarded him by dismissing him. At the age of forty-six, Guido was penniless, and was forced to appeal to his brother Paolo for advice and assistance. After Paolo arranged for the marriage with Pompilia, Pietro rebelled when he discovered Guido's true situation, but Violante arranged and completed the marriage secretly. Thus the Comparini discovered that "in the Countship was a truth, but in/ The counting up of the Count's cash, a lie." (IV, 492-93)

Now, Quid pauses, all of you take a breath for a minute and ask yourselves who was the dupe here--Guido or the Comparini? "Who/ Was fool, who knave? Neither and both, perchance." (IV, 506-07) Quid cannot help but hedge all his bets, and yet his argument is compelling. If we

can get through all the verbiage, he says, we can see that both sides traded to get something. The trade was one of a noble name in exchange for money and beauty. Both sides needed a lie to put a gloss over the marriage, "a lie/ To serve as a decent wrappage." (IV, 522-23) But the truth is, "each cheated each" so both are guilty. Quid brilliantly puts his finger on the fundamental fact: "Each did give and did take the thing designed,/ The rank on this side and the cash on that." (IV, 529-30) And Quid's attitude is that it is "The way of the world," the usual cold bargain struck in the market place. (IV, 532-33)

Here is the gist of it, he tells them. "Each sees a profit, throws the fine words in." (IV, 538) They had to dress it up in fancy words. If both sides had simultaneously discovered the pretense--as Quid puts it, "will Excellency forgive?"--it would be like a cook who "Strips away those long loose superfluous legs/ From either side the crayfish, leaving folk/ A meal all meat henceforth." (IV, 543-45) If they had thrown off the pretense from the start, a balance could have been maintained and just the "meat" of the facts would have been involved. Furthermore, Quid continues, by sheer chance, one party had the advantage of discovering the other party's cheat first while it kept its own concealed. For it was the foolish Pietro and Violante who saw that "The nobleman was penniless, and screamed/ 'We are cheated!'"

2

As Tertium Quid gets deeper into the story, his unquestioned brilliance begins to tarnish. His analogies, such as the crime that is like a stone you kick in the field, or his "worthless core" simile, offer a penetrating commentary on the issues involved. But just as he seems ready to carry his imaginative abilities into a significant reality for himself, he lets them drop. He says "But on the other hand" and begins to discuss carefully the other side's point of view. And for that other side, he applies his imagination with just as much force, so that the result in the end is a verbal deadlock. For both sides he uses his creative abilities only to neutralize the issues and sterilize the truth. From his point of view these abilities are always under the control of his cool, rational mind. Always, he feels, he is weighing the evidence impartially and logically. Occasionally, in order to illustrate the logical argument, he will draw upon an extended analogy to demonstrate the proof of what he is saying. But this is the only thing such an ability is good for.

As he recounts the story he summarizes the harsh treatment Pietro and Violante received in Arezzo, their return to Rome, and Violante's confession of Pompilia's illegitimacy. He discusses the Comparini's point of view (IV, 558-580) and then offers Guido's as a kind of retort

("On the other hand 'Not so!' Guido retorts" [IV, 581]) Quid uses the sophistic technique of discussing one of the issues as if it were his own point of view. Then, just at that point where his audience believes that this is his true attitude, he ends by stating something like, "So say the Comparini." (IV, 573) Then the audience has to re-adjust itself as Quid goes on to discuss the point of view of the other side.

The Comparini's charge is that Guido deceived them about his riches. Guido's retort is based on his assertion that his being poor was an irrelevancy, a "bye-product" that might end tomorrow if one of his uncles dies and leaves him more property. There is always the chance, he argues, that I will recover my wealth tomorrow. Tertium Quid's interest here is in the absurdity of the whole situation. He asks his audience "Which of the two here sinned most? A nice point!" (IV, 629) Of course we cannot decide but we can see certain aspects that stand out. For example, the fact that the Comparini blatantly exposed Guido's poverty to the world in the most embarrassing manner was a mistake. It was, Quid says, one more wrong than we needed. (IV, 650) Here Tertium Quid tends to side with one of his kind--a nobleman whose poverty is announced to the world.

Guido is forced to fight the Comparini charges by proxy. There is no way he can personally strike back from Arezzo. So he decides "To take revenge on a trifle over-

looked." (IV, 664) Here Quid offers a striking metaphor which is unerringly accurate. Pompilia was the "pet lamb" which the Comparini had left within Guido's reach. She was that thirteen-year-old girl who, until four months ago, was "Never a mile away from mother's house." (IV, 669) But she was taken "Out of the bower into the butchery." Guido concludes that if he plagues her, "he plagues them threefold." (IV, 677-78) His plan is to drive her into disgracing herself through adultery. His motivation is revenge on the Comparini for cheating him, and also to "blacken too a soul they boasted white." Guido wants to "show the world their saint in a lover's arms," or at any rate, Quid hastily adds, this is what they say. (IV, 696-98)

Quid then again shifts ground and reminds his audience that "On the other hand," it is easy to blame it on Guido, but the latter does not lack an apologist. For example, if the Comparini cared so much about their daughter, why did they not take her back to Rome with them when they left Arezzo? Then, to really compound the problem, Quid turns to the Prince in the salon and addresses him directly. He tells him that even if both sides had been honest and plain-dealing from the start, it still "would prove a difficult problem, Prince!" (IV, 715) Then Quid proves this assertion by developing an effective extended analogy in which he describes Pompilia and Guido as ingredients in a meal that is to be served. It "were hard to serve up a congenial dish/ Out of

these ill-agreeing morsels, Duke," (IV, 726-27) Quid says ingratiatingly, as he continues to try to address everybody as he speaks. Then add to this basic incompatibility between Pompilia and Guido, the abuse Guido received from the Comparini, the scandal of his poverty as it was bruited about Rome and Arezzo, and the meat of this "cook's craft" becomes "never a pheasant but a carrion-crow." (IV, 738) No, this meat Guido could not eat. And instead of using Violante's confession as an opportunity to divorce Pompilia and be rid of them all, Guido, filled with rage and hate, devised a plan whereby, if Pompilia committed adultery, he could get rid of her and keep the dowry too. Guido wants to blot out, "as by a belch of hell/ Their triumph in her misery and death," (IV, 754-55) and thus win on all counts.

Tertium Quid then pauses again as he considers Guido the person. "You see," he tells them, "the man was Aretine" and had that shrewd air and subtle wit. He was a nobleman too, and because of these qualities, he took a "finer vengeance" on the Comparini than they did on him. The peasants have their methods of revenge; the nobility, however, is something else. Guido's forged letters prove this; his revenge was not coarse, as the Comparini's carryings-on were, but subtle and hidden.

At any rate, Quid blandly reminds them, this is what they say; this is how a lot of people look at it. Quid then begins a series of imaginary dialogues concerning the principals

after he has told how Pompilia was--so some say--engulfed by Guido's torture and fled to first the Governor, then the Archbishop, then the friar, and from all three received the same negative response. In the dialogues (IV, 839-1124) which are spoken by Pompilia, Guido and Caponsacchi, Quid argues for each side. Would Guido, he asks, have built up Caponsacchi as such a terror to Pompilia when Caponsacchi was the very man he was going to use as bait? Furthermore, one might consider that Pompilia's complaints were heard and dismissed by the Governor and the Archbishop. Of course, the other side claims that the two were influenced by Guido's power in Arezzo, but how could a penniless nobleman have such influence? Moreover, how could Guido possibly have arranged for Pompilia and Caponsacchi to meet when the two parties did not even know each other? It is also difficult to accept Caponsacchi's version of his meeting with Pompilia and ultimate flight from Arezzo. Even if Pompilia'a tale is true and she really was wronged, what part of a priest's duties say that he put on a lay-dress and go skipping from the church-door with a married woman and spend the night with her at an inn?

Quid cannot plead for Caponsacchi very eloquently and it is difficult for him to accept the latter's claim that he felt the truth by "instinct." Quid has to laugh at this notion and he tells the Prince that instinct is surely a "Process which saves a world of trouble and time." (IV, 1007) He jokingly suggests to the Prince that the latter might try

the same technique. You should try Caponsacchi's truth by your own instinct, since that seems to be "the expeditious mode." (IV, 1010)

But Guido also has some more points to make about his version of the murder. They sneaked around behind my back, he claims. They attempted to use my maid, but she remained faithful to me. Then Guido starts pointing to those love letters that he found. What more proof does he need? I caught "this pair of saints" red-handed, Guido says, waving the letters. "I stand or fall by these." (IV, 1042) And finally, after more arguments from both sides (IV, 1042-1112) Tertium Quid breaks into his dialogues and says, enough. "Highness, decide! Pronounce, Her Excellency!"[1] But his listeners are silent.

Quid says, Then let us leave this argument in doubt and examine the trial itself. Of course some people say that the case is open-and-shut; the husband catches the wife and her paramour in the "very act of shame." What else could Guido do; it was a "man-to-man" situation--"nature must have her way." (IV, 1132-33) It is too bad, according to these people (Quid is, of course, here recounting Half-Rome's version of the case), that Guido did not clear things "on the spot." Another Roman view (not Other Half-Rome's) is that Guido might have still been in doubt when he caught

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[1]In the Italian language, high dignitaries in the seventeenth century took the feminine pronoun. Browning follows this convention.

up with them; or, if someone argues that Guido was a coward, then why did he pursue them in the first place?

The trial itself was of no help, Quid continues. The Court's position was that "'Each of the parties, whether goat or sheep/ I' the main, has wool to show and hair to hide.'" (IV, 1222-23) This is, of course, Quid's own position. The Court cannot take the case seriously. They criticize both parties for making such a bother. The Court decides that though all parties might be innocent, they should receive some mild punishment for stirring up a noise. Though Quid's attitude is roughly similar to the Court's, Quid can point out the fine but significant distinction. It is not his job to decide; society has invested that responsibility in the Courts. However, as he implied earlier, what can you expect? Law is a deus ex machina that the rabble expects to descend on stage and "clear things at the fifth act--aha!" (IV, 17) But the truth is, law is not up to it; it is just another facet to what Quid calls "the way of the world."

3

Tertium Quid, his tongue in cheek, his tone doubtless bland, his manner glib, moves effortlessly to his conclusion. He asks his listeners, "Is it settled so far?" Are you still with me? Have I settled the issues up to this point, or simply confused them? Perhaps another example, he suggests, will suffice to clear this up.

You've seen the puppet-shows in the Piazza Navona, he begins. Remember the formula: these plays about Punch and his mate always follow, "Threats pass, blows are dealt,/ And a crisis comes." (IV, 1283-84) By this time the crowd is clapping or hissing depending on whether they favor the husband's side or the wife's side. Now just at that moment when they have decided whose side they are on, the actors duck down, put on clothes that best suit their next adventure, and create a whole new effect. The problem is, the mob is already on the move "with something like a judgment pro and con," (IV, 1290) about the previous adventure. Suddenly, the whistle blows, up pop the actors, to re-engage in still another fight which attempts to show that "what you thought tragedy was farce." (IV, 1294) And note that the climax of these puppet-shows is invariably the appearance of the devil himself.

Well, says Quid, it is just so in the case before us. The principals have been on stage, moving about like puppets on a string. Then the principals "duck down" and you think the case is over. That is, Caponsacchi and Pompilia were tried and one was sent into exile and the other into a convent during this period. But suddenly after you've already made your judgment pro or con, the actors pop back up again and what you thought was a serious business turns into a joke. Suits and countersuits are filed as the whole thing drags clownishly along. Guido's friends argue that when Guido

discovered Pompilia was pregnant, he had to seek relief the only way he knew how--by murdering her. But Guido's foes have to laugh; the whole thing has got so out of hand, that for Guido, Pompilia's pregnancy is "'The luckiest of conceivable events,'" an excuse for him to solve all his problems at once.

Well, what have we? Quid asks. Pompilia's leaving the convent to live with her parents and give birth to her baby is no doubt a strange divergence. But, Quid maintains, "I simply take the facts, ask what they show." (IV, 1352)

Quid then proceeds to give a brilliantly graphic description of the murder as Guido breaks into the Pauline villa with his four thugs, stabs Violante "through and through," and then reaches past her falling body to Pietro and shouts "'with your son,/ This is the way to settle suits, good sire!'" (IV, 1375-76) After Pietro falls, Guido moves towards Pompilia, who "rushes here and there/ Like a dove," and then he stabs her. She too falls and Guido lifts her head up by her long black hair to see if she might be still alive. He "Draws a deep satisfied breath; 'So--dead at last!'" he says, and throws her body back across Pietro's knees. (IV, 1389-91)

When Guido and his four henchmen are caught the next morning, Guido is amazed. He cannot understand how they could know it was he. He asks the authorities who it was that told them. "'Why, naturally your wife!'" is the reply. (IV, 1421)

It staggers him that Pompilia lives to tell all and gets him in the end. But, Quid says, Pompilia had prayed for only one thing after the stabbing--not time to confess and save her soul--but "Time to make the truth apparent." (IV, 1429) And, Quid adds, this seems to be about the only prayer "She ever put up, that was granted her." (IV, 1432) At least, Quid quickly interjects, this is what her friends say.

Of course, he goes on, if we are honest about it we have to admit that Pompilia might have asked that final prayer out of her own guilt feelings. And her detractors point out that she has been consistent to the end. She gains both her goals; the first is to set her lover free and the second is to revenge herself upon Guido.

Moreover, Guido has a long list of complaints, Quid reminds them. He was cheated in getting a wife, robbed by her parents, made into a laughing-stock by the story of her birth, and disgraced by his wife's flight with a priest. Quid points out that Guido had earlier brought his case before a Tuscan court and they had found Pompilia guilty. But the court had had no jurisdiction in the case.

So, ultimately, Guido became his own judge. And the only argument, Quid says, against the way he used the law was that he did not kill them when he caught them. But what is "sooner" or "later" in this case? A wound in the flesh doubtless demands immediate redress. "But a wound to the soul? That rankles worse and worse," (IV, 1532) as time goes

by. Guido's critics, of course, reply that Guido was left many other avenues. "'We left this man/ Many another way, and there's his fault.'" (IV, 1542-43) When he discovered that he could not solve his problems the right way, he resorted to the wrong way. Does a man who is blunted as he coldly tries one way after another really become the victim of an injustice? Does a man who methodically hires assassins--plots, plans, executes--is he a man who is overcome by "'honest self-forgetting rage?'" (IV, 1557-58) It is no more likely to be the case than when a furious bull "'Pick out four help-mates from the grazing herd'" to travel with him until he finds his enemy.

But you are wrong, say Guido's supporters, picking up the "bull-similitude." For Guido's behavior is the proof. His slaughter was reckless and indiscriminate, proof that he was victimized by rage, and tormented by the injustice of it all; thus he murdered blindly. "Do you blame a bull?" Quid asks innocently.

4

Tertium Quid, now at the end of his story, surveys his audience with humor. To tell you the truth, he says, you look as puzzled as when I began. Why is that? Part of the problem is the fact that each party in the murder case "wants too much," and each party demands more sympathy for its object of compassion than it is entitled to.

The whole affair has been blown up out of all proportion. People cannot see realistically. They insist on making Pompilia an angel, "purity herself," and "her parents angels too." (IV, 1594) "Why," Quid finally says, "here you have the awfulest of crimes/ For nothing!" (IV, 1600-01) It is actually a crime concerning the commonalty, inherently trivial and insignificant. It is only "Hell broke loose on a butterfly!" And as for Guido, "here is the monster! Why, he's a mere man." (IV, 1603) He was, Quid argues, "Born, bred and brought up in the usual way." (IV, 1604) He had a mother like everybody else. His brothers continue to stand by him. The Governor and the Archbishop know and approve of him. Cardinal This and Cardinal That vouch for him.

Why build it up? Suppose it is a tragedy that malice could not improve upon? And here is innocent Guido with his four innocent assistants, and they are added, "all five, to the guilty three," so that we the citizenry can be instructed by "one full taste o' the justice of the world." In short, maybe they are all guilty.

"The long and the short is, truth is what I show," Quid asserts. (IV, 1618) Guido is noble, and he may be innocent. In fact it seems unduly harsh to try to get the truth out of him through torture. On the other hand, Quid says, hedging right to the last, if they exempt Guido because of his clerical privileges, Quid grants that he can think of no crime that ever was or ever will be so deserving of torture as

this one.

"Then abolish it!" Quid exclaims. Throw out the whole thing. "You see the reduction ad absurdum, Sirs?" he says. Any way you look at it, it becomes ridiculous. So who is to decide? Quid insists jokingly that "Her Excellency must pronounce, in fine!" (IV, 1632) But Her Excellency prefers joining the gambling. Quid turns to Her Highness, but it is late and Her Highness plans to retire. "I am of their mind," Quid says. But, he says, he hopes that all this talk has not been for nothing. It was good conversation and both Her Highness and Her Excellency now know as much about the murder case as all Rome.

And as he sees the bored expressions on their faces, Quid reaches a sad conclusion. "You'll see," he tells himself, "I have not so advanced myself,/ After my teaching the two idiots here!" (IV, 1639-40)

5

The reader might recall that Tertium Quid is in a fashionable Roman salon addressing an intimate group of people of the upper class--three of them are high dignitaries--who are standing and sitting around him, their attention not altogether undivided. One of the dignitaries, the Cardinal, is resolutely playing cards, but he cannot help listening with one ear as Quid reviews the Roman murder case.

Tertium Quid implies that the murder is a matter that

need not concern them, but it does make for interesting conversation. Under other circumstances, a murder which originated in the pleb and burgess class would be beneath their notice officially. But as a conversation piece to afford an evening's entertainment for the group, the murder has some small merit.

As Tertium Quid reviews the facts of the case, the reader discovers that Browning has taken pains to create an atmosphere which ostensibly appears to be accidental on the poet's part. As Cook noted, Browning presents his picture of late seventeenth century Italian aristocratic society "without any apparent effort or over-emphasis."[1]

In reviewing the case, Quid inevitably reveals the society in which he and his companions move; it is obviously a sophisticated, aristocratic and wealthy group, and they are obviously in control of the affairs of the city. Quid mentions various areas of the city: the crowd at the puppet-play of Piazza Navona--the largest market-place in Rome; he has occasion, in telling his story, to describe the washer-women at work by the fountain in the Piazza Citorio; when he discusses the circumstances surrounding the manner in which Paolo arranges for the marriage of Guido and Pompilia, we follow him as he describes the lady barbers at the wig shop of the Piazza Colonna--a place much frequented by all manner of people, including noblemen such as Guido. In the course of

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[1]Cook, Commentary, p. 74.

his summary of the case, he mentions the then fashionable custom of having a negro page; he lowers his voice when he speaks obliquely of a current scandalous affair within his own social set; inside the salon itself we are told of the jewels of the Principessa, who is present, and whose jewels are multiplied and reflected by the many mirrors surrounding her; the powdered wigs of the two dignitaries whom Tertium Quid is addressing directly are spoken of; then there is the "testy cardinal, who, if you jostle his cards, will rap you out a ...st!"[1]

These remarks are merely incidental to Tertium Quid's summary of the murder story as he sees it. However, it would not be accurate to say that he is not aware that he is indicating his own social position; it is precisely because he cannot resist snobbishly identifying himself with those dignitaries whom he is addressing that he frequently resorts to pointed remarks about his own station in life. He seems bent on separating himself entirely from the "rabble's-brabble of dolts and fools/ Who make up reasonless unreasoning Rome." (IV, 10-11) Why it would be necessary for him to do this can be arrived at by supposition: Tertium Quid is a gentleman farmer and an aristocrat but he is not equal in rank to those people he is addressing and he obviously wants to be. When he tells his story, he is actually using it as

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[1]All these details are admirably summarized in Cook, Commentary, p. 74.

a vehicle by which he may ingratiate himself further into their favor; he is subtly toadying up to them; he is following carefully the upper-class social code of behavior, telling his auditors what he feels they want to hear. He admits to no personal bias; he has no axe to grind; he is cooly detached. How could he possibly be otherwise when the case involves people almost entirely of the burgess class? Let the plebs wax emotional and indignant about it. They, after all, identify with the principals in this puppet-show and feel as though they have a personal stake in the outcome. But he could not care less; it is not good form to display feeling; it is a violation of the aristocrat's code; and it is particularly bad form to display feeling toward members of the lower social classes. Since they are motivated by irrational considerations, it is difficult to take them seriously.

One could not possibly view the murder story as material for the romance books. There is nothing fanciful involved here; the ideals which both sides contend they were trying to uphold are merely cover-ups for their true motives. After all, he points out, when one strips away all the rationalizations, charges and countercharges, one can easily see that each side cheated the other. It is absurd to idealize it. There are no heroes or heroines involved, only the plebs, and they are once again immersed in one of their sordid scandals; it hardly matters who is the most guilty. There will

always be crimes--irrational in nature--on this level and one should not attempt to discover any sort of order or purpose in the lives of these simpletons. And once you set an irrational set of circumstances on its way, it develops a sort of logic and inevitability of its own. Although there is a trial coming up, it is merely the "last link of a chain/ Whereof the first was forged three years ago. (IV, 22-3)

When Tertium Quid moves toward the close of his analysis, he sums up his own attitude by stating that the whole thing is a "reduction ad absurdum" (IV, 1631) a phrase which is indicative not only of Tertium Quid's opinion toward the murder, but a phrase which also reveals the central ambiguity and indecisiveness in his own personality, and in the ethical concepts of the aristocratic class of Rome in 1698.

6

Park Honan guesses at Tertium Quid's background through the kind of images the latter employs; these images generally center around farm land and the objects one would associate with farming. The animals Quid speaks of are predominantly farm animals; many of the terms are terms connected with the gentleman farmer who is also fond of outdoor sport, especially hunting.[1] He uses such phrases as "a

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[1]Honan, p. 182.

leash of lawyers," (IV, 44) and "our brace of burgesses." (IV, 313) The dead bodies of Pietro and Violante are a "bale" of "cargo." (IV, 29-30) Guido is a swine and a "furious bull," (IV, 1559) Pompilia is a "cur-cast mongrel" (IV, 611) and Caponsacchi is a hare. The way Tertium Quid uses these images, it seems clear that both of the parties in the case are "equally objectionable."[1] Each of the parties is really beneath serious notice and he can regard them only as litigants in a murder trial; he even imagines the Court as saying that whether or not the two parties are "goat or sheep," each of them "has wool to show and hair to hide." (IV, 1222-23)[2]

In fact, when Tertium Quid at the end asks his renowned audience, "You see the reduction ad absurdum, Sirs?" (IV, 1631) humanity itself becomes something that he has attempted to reduce to absurdity. As Tertium Quid works to dissociate himself from the burghers and the plebs and identify himself with the Roman upper class, he becomes so detached that he divorces himself from humanity in general. Thus the world that he desires to create is no world, really. It is a world without people, without feeling, without experience. It is very like the puppet-show which he tells us about. Everything seems strangely lifeless; strings are pulled, figures move about, predictable behavior occurs. Tertium Quid and his

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[1]Ibid.

[2]Cited in Honan, p. 183.

audience undergo slowly a transformation into straw figures. Like the principals in the murder story, they go through their paces, attend the fashionable salon, play cards, listen to the latest gossip and then retire. Their behavior is thoughtless and mechanical, their activity purposeless and inhuman.

Even in his speech, in his use of balance and parallel structure, Tertium Quid reveals to us that he is not so concerned with what he says, but how he says it, as in the "symmetrical" first lines of his monologue. (IV, 1-8)[1] Since he apparently is insecure socially, he feels the need to employ "elaborate syntax, diction and alliteration" in order to "impress the fashionable people around him."[2] In this way, he exploits the murder and reveals himself as an unprincipled social-climber. In reality he has probably bored his audience by his account of the murder--partially because anything would bore them--and if he in this way uses the murder to further his own ends, it is not likely that he has been very successful.

What is more important, however, is the psychological trap which he has unknowingly set for himself. Tertium Quid is the only monologuist in the poem who seems to have denied himself the right to exercise his creative abilities to any great extent. It is obvious that he has these abilities

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[1]Cited in Honan, pp. 278-9.

[2]Cited in Honan, p. 280.

because his monologue is filled with analogies and metaphors. But the curious manner in which he employs his creative talent perhaps explains why this "play," this "puppet-show," as he conceives of it, seems so mechanical and lifeless. Of course it is difficult for him to bring life to his drama because he has a tendency to regard the principals as inanimate objects rather than real human beings. They are like the animals and other objects on his farm; they have no existence in themselves; they exist only for his convenience, and under such circumstances they can be exploited mercilessly.

This lifeless attitude inevitably carries over into Tertium Quid's own social class. The society he describes seems typically brittle and sophisticated; it has a certain hollow quality to it; there is something deadening about its very existence. There are hints of corruption--the Cardinal gambling at cards, the married couple involved in a scandal, the Principessa's diamonds reflected in the mirrors--which Tertium Quid is partly aware of. The class as a whole has no vital ethical center; Quid's monologue, in fact, suggests that once you refine your judgments to the extent to where you cannot make judgments, then the ethical center of your world dissolves. E.D.H. Johnson calls it "the born skeptic's inability to make a choice."[1] And although the fourth book is a "real measure of the ambiguities which the affair has

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[1]"Robert Browning's Pluralistic Universe," TQ, 31 (October, 1961), p. 24.

taken on,"[1] it is also a real measure of the impotence and ineffectiveness of the society of which Quid desires so much to be a part; it also provides the scale by which we can measure Quid's own success in using his imaginative abilities.

Perhaps the most effective way of determining Tertium Quid's methods in exercising his own artistry is to contrast it with the terrific success which Caponsacchi and Pompilia realize in their own creative efforts. This process will be explained at greater length in Chapters 8-11, but it is well to introduce it now in order to demonstrate the working out of the process.

7

The ability to re-shape and actually half-create (or at least extend the values of) one's very reality is, as Johnson has stated, a moral process. Caponsacchi and Pompilia extend the beliefs which they personally adhere to by flying in the face of a system of values in opposition to their own. It is impossible for them to extend their values in the world as they know it. They are obliged to create another kind of reality other than the one that they find themselves bound by. In this way their values can find the room to become operative. The kind of reality they create is not entirely mythical, but it does re-vitalize various myths which can have a modern application for the principals

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[1] Ibid.

who evoke them. In other words, myth is a form of pre-philosophy which seeks to explain reality, and which can be re-applied continuously. Caponsacchi and Pompilia take this path to move on up towards the higher reality which spiritually they regard as God and heaven. On a figurative level, they are reaching through the ambiguities and loss of idealism which are at the base of the societies of Rome and Arezzo. They are going beyond this towards a universal sympathy or a universal love, the concomitant of which they feel exists within themselves. They cannot "prove" it, but they know it is there.

In the face of the world they live in, and the values it goes by, they assert collectively their own creative wills. As Johnson states, it is through their recognition of the evil inherent in the reality which has been engendered upon them that they rebel, regardless of the consequences. They both know that there is more in reality than what has been made accessible to them. It is not that the values which they believe in have not existed in the world before, but that they do not exist now. Caponsacchi and Pompilia re-vitalize these values; in fact, it is the same kind of "re-pristination" which Browning describes in Book I in connection with his own artistic ability to re-shape the facts of the old yellow Book.

These values (the basic value is the central concept of love which is at the heart of the poem) are new in the

sense that Caponsacchi and Pompilia create them anew, make them work once more. They do this by asserting what we have to regard as the powerful wills of two strong personalities. They cause an upheaval in the "real" world. At first they are required to move into another kind of "mythic" reality in order to gain inspiration to do what they know they must do. Once they have done this, however, their values and their own sense of what reality amounts to cannot be divorced from the typical real-life world of Rome and Arezzo which is described to us by Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome, and Tertium Quid.

Unlike Other Half-Rome's world of the romance-books, the new reality which Caponsacchi and Pompilia help to create is not divorced from the disjointed world which they are rebelling against. It is the same reality, but it is a reality which is plastic, which can be molded and shaped by the very people who participate in it. The plastic nature of reality, the multiform nature of truth, require us to exercise our own creative abilities; we derive poetic inspiration from such a dazzling, shifting kind of reality, and through our own artistic abilities, we can give to that reality a sense of moral order and purpose. It is through their own will to believe that Caponsacchi and Pompilia uncover what seems to be an ethical center in reality. But, as Johnson suggests, this impression is dependent on nothing less than their creative ability to impose their own will-to-believe "through the resources of an art which does not simply enunciate, but which actually

becomes the vital form of that belief."[1] In other words, they must impose their own will to believe through art; in this case, the word "art" is used to mean their own imaginative resources; once they have exercised their creative imagination they have given their belief a form--an artistic one to be sure--and this form or structure gives their reality and their own values an order and purpose which it could not possess otherwise. This is why the process is ultimately one of "moral creativity."

In short, Caponsacchi and Pompilia choose to take "the hard way." They see that for them this is the only way. The Pope is the only other principal in the poem who sees this, since this is the way he has always taken.

Tertium Quid, however, does not see this. In fact he uses his imaginative abilities to block this very sort of insight. Quid accepts the plasticity of reality; not only does he accept it, he seems to revel in it. He enjoys the knowledge that nothing can be known for sure, that truth is elusive and pluralistic, that values shift and change shape; that there is no good or bad, justice or crime, virtue or depravity. But Quid can take it no further than this. At first glance it appears as though he plays down his own artistic ability; the implications of his monologue suggest that he does not think well of "fanciful" interpretations of

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[1]Johnson, "Robert Browning's Pluralistic Universe," p. 39.

the murder case. This is not the place for one to be imaginative, but for one to be coolly logical. And it is never very important for us to reach a final judgment on the case because it is impossible to say which side is most guilty. By the nature and tone of his speech, Quid inevitably leaves us with the impression that life itself is like this. All of us are selfishly motivated; on the lower social levels such motivations usually manifest themselves in irrational and vulgar behavior. But as for judging the right and wrong, who can say? If we are all motivated by selfishness, then ambiguities develop concerning matters of right or wrong.

Quid is not objecting to the rabble's judgment of the case so much as he is their presumption in discussing it at all. The way he sees it, neither lower nor upper class can arrive at a final judgment; the fact that Half-Rome and Other Half-Rome are making and passing judgments annoys him; they really do not know anything about anything. He further implies that it is because of their general ignorance that they are able to pass judgment at all. Were they qualified to discuss the case, it would be different; they would be in the same state of uncertainty that Quid is.

Tertium Quid is, like Arcangeli and Bottini, without strong convictions. Quid has no will-to-believe. . .in anything. Thus there is no necessity to impose an art form on reality as he knows it; instead, he uses analogies and metaphors which help to sustain his attitude that the world is

uncertain, ambiguous and that there can be no final judgments and no convictions. He will draw brilliant figurative comparisons using effective metaphors, such as Guido the "furious bull" and Pompilia the "pet lamb" who is taken "out of the bower and into the butchery," when he is arguing for one side or the other. But no sooner has he got us convinced--by using his own creative talents--that one side is guilty, than he begins to employ his artistry to speak just as eloquently for the other. Thus his artistry, brilliant though it is, has no artistic form because there is no will-to-believe on Quid's part. He uses his abilities to draw analogies whereby he can show that there is always more than one way to look at something, and that they are all equally valid. In short, he has no faith; that is, he feels no need to use his creative ability to impose a kind of moral order--through his will-to-believe--on his own life and world. He resembles Pompilia's lawyer, Bottini, in this sense, except that Bottini has gone ahead and developed his own artistic ability because it has amused him to do so, and it has also been financially beneficial to him. Bottini regarded his artistry as a kind of plaything which provided him with some satisfaction. Quid uses his artistry to neutralize human behavior.

Thus Tertium Quid does exercise his creative ability, but his only goal is to make sure he does not have to face up to the responsibility of having convictions in mind. His only purpose is to move up on the social ladder by entertaining

his betters; he knows he must be detached, cool and rational--at least ostensibly--and also indecisive; his artistry, at least a part of it, becomes one of imitation; he simply mimics his social superiors, while at the same time he exploits the principals in the Roman murder case. In addition, he uses his imaginative brilliance to blunt, to forestall, to prevent any of his listeners from adopting a particular point of view; he wants to keep them from developing their beliefs; he wants them to turn away from the will-to-believe by not exercising that very talent (of creativity) which traditionally has sustained that will.

8

Once Tertium Quid concludes that each side is guilty, and once he proceeds from that conclusion, his case is closed. He, a discriminating raconteur, and in spite of all his refinements of the issues, makes no distinctions in the trial. The principals, with the exception of Guido and Caponsacchi, are in the burgess class. And as for Guido, it is almost as if he had deserted his own kind, since we get no hint from Quid that he feels any kinship-of-class for Guido. Although a nobleman with a centuries' old family name, Guido is impoverished, the member of a once-famous family but now no longer included in the social register. (IV, 355-380) At any rate, this is the way Quid seems to regard him. Guido has not been discreet; he has sullied himself by allowing his

name and family to be mixed up with the plebs; therefore, he has to be dropped; he can no longer be considered seriously as a member of the aristocracy; his whole background and person are too tattered.

The other side of this coin is the Comparini. Once again Quid cannot discriminate. He is unable to tell the difference between Pompilia and her parents. He does not stop to consider that Pompilia might be different in some unique way from other of her plebs or that Caponsacchi, from an aristocratic family himself, might have real convictions, unlike other members of the aristocracy. He does not understand the issues which underlie the sequence of events in the murder. The behavior of the principals has little chance for honest analysis because Tertium Quid, in refusing to judge the case, is in actuality prejudging it. Quid has already assumed that the world is full of ambiguities, that we cannot really know anything, and that since we cannot, then we cannot believe in anything with all of our hearts and minds. Thus, he does not really give the case the objective and rational inquiry that he says he does.

It is because of his own prejudging that he concludes that both sides are guilty. He makes no attempt to sift out the essentials; he does not consider that Pompilia is innocent and her parents are guilty; he can only go so far as to suggest that the Comparini are guilty and perhaps Pompilia is less guilty; thus his view of the facts--his view of human ex-

perience in general--is not really a view but a re-view. Or as Eliot's Prufrock was to put it, there is not only time for visions, but for a hundred revisions, as people sit around coffee cups and card tables and endlessly discuss the murder case because it is a good vehicle for social conversation.

His belief that only by cool reasoning, only by carefully weighing the facts, only by impersonally considering the points of view of both sides, can one arrive at any justifiable conclusions, is no more sound than it would be for the scientist who believed that there were only two possibilities. For Tertium Quid mistakenly believes that there are only two sides to the murder case, and he employs his imagination to drive that attitude home. Even though his name means a third thing, differing from the two views advanced prior to his, he uses his imagination to block the truth--which is that Caponsacchi and Pompilia are really the "tertium quid" of the story. They are that third thing, higher than the other, going beyond the other two--a third and brilliant side to the coin--because they have the will to believe and the courage to place their beliefs squarely up against the blackness of Guido's "world by torchlight."

CHAPTER VII

GUIDO'S WORLD BY TORCHLIGHT

1

In the fifth book of The Ring and the Book we finally meet the villain himself. The reader has been introduced to him so many times, and from so many points of view, that Guido can hold few surprises for us. Browning has carefully prepared us psychologically for Guido's personality. In Book I, Browning tells us flatly that he is the villain of the piece. He is introduced as the murderer (I, 120-25) when Browning translates for us the title page of the old yellow Book. When Browning summarizes the arguments of Bottini (I, 165-76) and Arcangeli (I, 176-97) and their legal assistants (I, 200-13), Guido, as Honan points out, "appears in a guilty light."[1] Then, when Browning allows the Pope to speak (I, 328-43) Guido is condemned by Browning himself, since he has delineated the Pope as "just, merciful, humble, great and good." (I, 300-26)[2] Browning leads us to believe that the Pope's opinion of Guido is essentially the correct

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[1]Honan, p. 294. Honan brings together all the references to Guido's guilt.

[2]Ibid.

one.

Thus, before the first book is half finished, we know that Guido is the murderer and that he is guilty. Later, there are formal introductions to Guido's two monologues (I, 949-1015, 1272-1329) which, among other things, describe further his personality. The result is, "By the end of Book I we have met exactly the Guido that we are to know intimately in Books V and XI." The major difference, of course, is that after we have read his two monologues our impression of his personality is "enriched many times over."[1] We experience "the artistic impact of his portrait."[2]

We do more than this, however, What is truly fantastic about Guido is that we experience his own artistry; we are subjected to it, beguiled by it, and perhaps even briefly seduced by it. In Book V, which this chapter will concentrate upon, we experience Guido as the artist who is prostituting himself. Just as Bottini, the public prosecutor, later "sells out," Guido falsifies his true nature, goes back on his true principles, and "sells out" in his first monologue. His artistry in the fifth book is nothing short of brilliant, but for Guido it is false art and he knows it. It is false because Guido is absolutely and irrevocably committed to the principle of evil. He is a villain because he believes in villainy, just as Pompilia is a heroine because she believes in goodness. Guido's truth is hatred, Pompilia's truth is

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[1]Ibid., p. 295. [2]Ibid.

love. But in the fifth book Guido uses his artistry to conceal his black nature. He must portray himself to the judges in a manner that he knows they want to see. His behavior must be in accord with the sanctioned behavior of the Italian aristocracy of the times. It must be normal and typical; he must convince the judges that he is one of their kind, and that he is motivated by the same qualities that they are motivated by. Concerning the murder itself, he must make the judges see that he was compelled to murder by the very same values that have motivated him in his ordinary daily life as a seventeenth century Italian nobleman. For the same reasons that he is a count, an educated man, intellectually and socially aware, with a long family history, following the customs and habits and the training of all people of his class--for these very reasons he must show that he was obliged to commit a murder--not once but three times. If he can convince the judges of this, he knows he will win his case. So, he applies all his imaginative and creative efforts towards this end. This is, of course, not at all what he is really like. And he is not being true to his nature when he is doing this, but his life is at stake here and he must bend his efforts for this most crucial meeting with the judges.

Guido appears before the judges "in a small chamber that adjoins the Court." (I, 950) The judges know him well, since most of them were at the trial the previous May when he brought charges against Caponsacchi and Pompilia after he

caught them at Castelnuovo. At that time they were unable to take the case too seriously, and their attitude toward Guido was mockingly humorous. Now, of course, Guido has forced them into a more serious frame of mind. As he tries to gauge their reactions, based on what they know about him, and how he will speak to them now, he wraps his personality in what Cook calls "artifice and subterfuge."[1] He must make his views in accord with the ambiguous opinions of the Italian aristocracy of his time. Only in this manner can the judges identify with him. Thus Guido makes from the start a "frank disavowal of any claim to be on a higher level than the average worldling of his time."[2] He gains sympathy from the judges when he describes how his poverty has made him "a laughing-stock, and how his life generally has been a series of deceptions and disappointments."[3] His attitude toward the judges as he speaks to them suggests the kind of attitude a typical impoverished Italian might have. He can be bitingly sarcastic and disapprovingly critical in his attitude toward them, particularly since they know him and he knows them. But for the most part his tone is conciliatory. On both counts, this is what they would expect and this is what he gives them.

In his two monologues Guido, like some of Browning's other scoundrels, demonstrates a high degree of intellect. His thoughts "often hit the truth." He can be profound, even

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[1]Cook, Commentary, p. 92. [2]Ibid., p. 234.

[3]Ibid.

noble; he can be deftly ironic, deeply subtle.[1] His creative abilities have a power and brilliancy all their own. He uses them in the fifth book in order to gain the sympathy of the judges. He must have this if he is to win acquittal. When they first bring him before the judges and offer him some wine, he declines more than one sip because, as he says, "I want my head/ To save my neck, there's work awaits me still." (V, 7-8)

2

I could not give her the kind of love she wanted, Guido tells the judges. Some people have criticized him because no mention of love has come up in the murder case. But Pompilia, the "child, girl, wife, in one," wanted youth and romance. She wanted the "beating pulse, the rolling eye, the frantic gesture" of some handsome and passionate swain. No, Guido says, there were no roses in my shoes, or a plume in my cap, or a trio of guitars and singers at my side. These are all good things and a girl has a right to demand them "when the fit price is paid the proper way." (V, 667-77) But was this that kind of a marriage? he asks. Was Pompilia a girl from my own class? he wants to know. NoW, "Had it been some friend's wife," who had dropped her fan at his foot with a note saying that she was willing to risk "'Shame, death, damnation,'" just so she be with him for a minute--"Why, at such sweet self-sacrifice--who knows?" (V, 678-82)

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[1] Ibid.

he asks insinuatingly.

Guido here paints a picture of himself that is part of his larger portrait. He is, he suggests, like most noblemen, and his reactions, if a married woman of his own class pressed her favors upon him, would be the typical one of any Italian aristocrat in his position. He knows the judges will understand this; they would do practically the same thing, although the idea of Guido himself--fifty years old, sallow-faced, hawk-nosed, shaggily bearded and scrawny in physical stature--involved in something like this perhaps appears as incongruous to them as it does to the reader.

Guido is, of course, not identifying love with marriage. His conception of love seems to stem from the romantic infatuations--especially if they are illicit--that men of his class habitually get themselves involved in. It is, he implies, one of the accepted practices of the worldly aristocrat of the time and Guido here sketches it out in the false picture of himself that he is artistically constructing.

The idea of such an assignation enlivens his fancy and as he warms to his task he offers a further and almost lascivious illustration to drive his point home. Suppose, he tells us, "some other friend's. .say daughter," came upstairs into his chambers and "tumbled flat and frank on me?" Supposing she was bareheaded and barefooted, with her hair loose, and with her clothes arranged in such a way that they were purposely revealing? What if she was suddenly all over

him, begging him to take her, even though she was the adolescent daughter of "'Duke So-and-So, the greatest man in Rome,'" and has "broke bounds" to get away from him, having come all the way across town just to be with Guido? Well, Sirs, Guido says, with familiarity, if she did come, "The lady had not reached a man of ice!" (V, 685-92)

This passage is revealing of Guido's true personality at the same time that it indicates how he is busily working away at his art. The picture of the young girl--not some friend's wife but some friend's daughter (and this makes it all the more sexually appealing since it is such forbidden fruit)--is a daring artistic stroke on Guido's part. He cannot afford to miscalculate here. Everything depends on the attitudes of the judges. Both parties know what the accepted conventions are. The kind of things Guido describes must not violate the judges' moral sense--which would be largely a matter of taste. Since they are in private chambers without an audience, the judges will not be required to put on conventional masks and pay lip service to a conventional morality which nobody in the upper class gives much credence to. Guido knows these men; they are the same ones who shrugged at the illicit romantic entanglements of Pompilia and Caponsacchi in the earlier trial the previous May.

The other side of the coin is Guido's own inner self. He has obviously thought of such illicit affairs himself, and the one with the young girl especially appeals to him,

as he believes it will to the judges. She is somebody young, fresh, ripe; she is innocent and virginal; she is the decent, virtuous sort, the daughter of the most prestigious man in Rome. It would be quite a lift to Guido's debased ego if she desired him above all others--an impossibility in reality, both for Guido and probably for the judges. All these details Guido the artist includes in his little vignette and he knows they will add relish to the tale.

But while he is trying to manipulate the judges and play on their attitudes at the same time that he is daringly admitting to them that he is no different from other worldly Italian aristocrats, he unknowingly reveals to us a flash of his true nature, of which we will not receive the full force until his second monologue. Such a revelation helps to explain at least a small part of Pompilia's appeal to him: she was young--very young--and beautiful, and it would be his pleasure to violate her. Unfortunately, however, he can carry it no further in Pompilia's case for, while he does violate her physically, it is impossible for him to corrupt her goodness, and he knows this just as instinctively as Pompilia does. Moreover, the imaginary Duke's daughter in Guido's picture is, despite her training and social station, sexually perverse herself, and recognizes in Guido the man of courtliness and experience who can bring out what has lain dormant inside her. This is the way all women are basically; this is the implication of Guido's lascivious portrait. He wants women

to be basically corrupt, and he suggests that the origin of their corruption lies in their sexual nature. It infuriates him that Pompilia is totally immune to this corruption and is in fact by her very nature in perfect opposition to it.

In his second monologue, when he defiantly flings aside his **sheep**'s clothing to reveal his "wolf's shag" we see what he finally understands--that all along, he has hated Pompilia with the purest, deepest and blackest kind of hatred, "for no other reason than that she is good."[1] In the second monologue, he casts aside all the "artifice and subterfuge" that he applies in his speech before the judges. He admits that he hated her because **she** was good, because she was utterly self-possessed, because she regarded him with the detached and "terrible patience of God." (XI, 1373-80)[2]

But now, before the judges, he perhaps cannot articulate for himself his true feelings about Pompilia, so industrious is he in drawing his false picture of himself, in order that it will fit in with contemporary Italian attitudes. His notions of love and marriage are the ones **he** believes the judges will expect him to have. And, indeed, they are not precisely false attitudes on his part so much as they are the first layer of attitudes on his part. These values of love and marriage Guido might go along with as pragmatic

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[1]Robert Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 111.

[2]Cited in Langbaum, ibid., p. 111.

notions which seem to work in his own time, for his own particular social class. Everyone accepts them and uses them as a cover to operate under. Most noblemen have both wives and mistresses and keep the one distinct from the other. Each has its place. The wife is a practical matter, a bargain struck for the financial benefit of both sides. A mistress, on the other hand, satisfies one's sexual and emotional needs.

Thus it is foolish for the rabble to inquire as to whether or not love was an issue in Guido's marriage to Pompilia; she was a hawk that Guido "bought at a hawk's price and carried home/ To do hawk's service." (V, 703-04)[1] It was a bargain pure and simple. Pompilia "was no pigeon," but a hawk--a bird Guido bought for its practical value, as he would buy other animals for his estate. She was a possession, nothing more. Despite what was said, both parties knew it was an exchange for the benefit of each side; this has been the way marriages have been arranged for hundreds of years. Why, Guido asks persuasively, am I being criticized for doing it now?

3

Love, of course, is only one part of Guido's complex portrait. Since he knows it is necessary to prostitute his

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[1]The hawk passage is lucidly analyzed by Honan, Browning's Characters, pp. 298-305)

art, he must ask certain questions. What do they want to hear? What would sound most reasonable and yet fit the facts? What would sound as though it were the thing that really happened? The answers will indicate the way he paints his false portrait. It cannot be idealized; the judges know him too well for that. The portrait must show him as both good and bad, like everything else that is uncertain in the ethically ambiguous upper-class. It must show that his action is typical of a man of his class, and such a typical reaction must contain its own justification; that is, his justification for his murderous acts must be the typical justification of the average Italian nobleman. It is what most people in his condition would have done under the circumstances. Then, once he has established this premise, he may go on to enlarge his own acts as essentially the correct ones and emerge as the put-upon hero of the piece, rather than its villain.

His artistry is thus clever but superficial; Guido knows its nonsense. But his contempt for legal institutions, which he discloses in his second monologue, he must keep hidden here. His life depends on whether or not he can persuade them that his false portrait is the way it really was. His artistic strategy is to admit the murder from the start, then to work slowly up from bad to good. That is, Guido looks better and better the further we get into his speech. At first he is a little man, old, in ill-health, scrawny, married to a young, promiscuous girl who gets restless and

begins to cast about for younger, more virile and more exciting companions.

He has what Cook calls an "acid pseudo-cheerfulness"[1] when he first enters the private chambers of the judges. No, he says, waving help away, I can stand somehow, "half sit down/ Without help, make shift even to speak somehow, you see." (V, 1-3) He is being very magnanimous about the whole thing. Though having been put on the rack and tortured, and even yet in pain, he is all right. He deliberately reveals a trace of sarcasm to the judges, since it is necessary for his portrait. For, if he is indeed innocent, as he will show them (his plea is really the equivalent of justifiable homicide), then they have gone too far by torturing him, and it is especially an insult on account of his rank. It is not your fault, he tells the person who is assisting him into the chamber. After all "Law is law," in spite of the fact that the vulgar have always thought "Noblemen were exempt. . ./ From racking." (V, 11-13) Law apparently thinks otherwise now.

At the same time that he calls attention to his torture, he dismisses it; to the reader it is all rather obviously theatrical but then, now is the time for cheap dramatics if there ever was one. In fact Guido, already beginning to lay the first brush strokes for his artistic production, turns around and thanks them for the deed. "In short I thank you,--

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[1]Cook, Commentary, p. 92.

yes, and mean the word." (V, 20) The rack is a novel form of taking pain. After all, it is "Getting tortured merely in the flesh." (V, 23) He thought he would not be able to withstand it, but he finds that it has served as a sort of counter irritation to the spiritual torture which he has undergone for the past four years. You see, he tells them somewhat pathetically, "Four years have I been operated on/ I' the soul," (V, 29-30) so that physical torture acts as a kind of release from the psychological discomfort. It is his soul, he says, establishing the first piece in his artistic framework. There has been an invasion into the privacy of his soul. And so many things are involved in this invasion, he tells them.

Guido paints carefully, delineating each detail. My self-respect was involved, he says, and my anxiety over our good name, my pride in the historicity of that good name, and the love I bore for my family, and my responsibility to them as head of the house. They looked up through the dim shadows to my face "And fancied they found light there." (V, 35) He begins to add to his framework, building slowly; as an artist he is selective but he is thorough. This is what leads him to speak eloquently and poignantly on the impoverishment of the Franceschini house--the tatters that have been exposed to the world. His father left him poor and Guido grew up forced to take on responsibility; his environment was such, he claims, that now that he has reached middle age

he is inevitably sour and saturnine. Guido artfully omits the fact that he left Arezzo when he was sixteen, came to Rome to seek his fortune, and played toady to the Cardinal for thirty years; in reality his responsibility towards his family in Arezzo is an artistic device rather than a truth.

As a middle-aged man, he says, the rumor was that he beat his young wife if he caught her taking to the window. Oh, surely, he beats her, Guido laughs, if you want to take the word of every gossip monger in the crowd. And as for the economies that his mother has practiced in the house for all of them, well, the mob can let that alone. Rejoicing in God by drinking wine that is three parts water, and scrimping along at the dinner table, and dealing with the Comparini--the Court's physical torture is a trifle compared to these.

I give you this brief catalogue, he tells them, through policy. And here Guido as much as admits his artistic maneuverings. It is a rhetorician's trick, he says, to touch on many points at the first of his speech and reserve the "choicer points" for later, "Having an eye to [the] climax." (V, 77-81) This is precisely what Guido is doing. "I married the mongrel of a drab," he suddenly exclaims. What was I supposed to do with somebody who had duped me and was in the arms of a priest, calling their bastard my heir? (V, 88-93) Your sole mistake, he tells the judges, was in putting me on the rack at all. Why go to all those pains just to make a stone roll down hill--a stone that is already

on its way? Why "rack and wrench/ And rend a man to pieces?" The only thing you succeed in doing is to make him open his mouth in his own defense. You make him "Show cause for what he has done." Certainly it was "irregular deed" and it is apparent that he did it. No one can or would dispute that. But perhaps he can clear his name and fame, and stop his neck from falling to the ax. There's no point in "calling in screws to help!" Then Guido says, "I killed Pompilia Franceschini, Sirs;/ Killed too the Comparini." (V, 109-10) He says it disarmingly, with confidence and a tone of righteousness in his voice. "There's the irregular deed," he tells them. Now what we need is a just and correct interpretation of that deed, "And truth so far--am I to understand?" (V, 115) Isn't this what we want, to get at the truth? Then let us get at it as fast as possible, because in spite of my boast, I feel the pain in my ailing shoulder and might pass out at any moment, "Whatever the good will in me." (V, 120)

"Now for truth!" he says dramatically, as he ends his prologue and prepares to launch into his full-scale artistic production, creating his most complex and most intricate lie.

4

One might note Guido's artistic technique here in the introductory speech of his monologue. The first section (V, 1-120) serves as a microcosm of the rest of his speech. It is the symbol of his art and of his artistic technique.

Guido touches on almost all the things that he will speak on at much greater length. He gives the judges a sort of plot outline or summary of his story, in order to prepare them for what to expect in the artistic production itself. It makes little difference into what art medium we place Guido's endeavors, whether it be the art of the painter, or the dramatist, or the rhetorician; he mentions all three. Also, he is a conscious artist, and he knows what he is doing and where he is going. He casually admits to the judges that he is exercising his art, because even this is part of his technique. The judges, he knows, will appreciate him much more if he makes some effort to impose a form or framework on this muddled business. What the judges want is order, purpose, meaning. If he can embellish it and make it interesting, he will even enliven their day; though they are aware of what he is doing, he obviously hopes they will admire him for it, rather than be wary of listening to it. Art, after all, includes illogical things like metaphors and tends to minimize what Honan calls "factually demonstrable relationships."[1]

As Honan illustrates when he analyzes Guido's "hawk" passage, Guido uses metaphors not simply to illustrate or embellish his meaning, but to <u>express</u> his meaning.[2] For example, when Guido refers to Pompilia as a hawk, he knows

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[1]Honan, p. 299. [2]<u>Ibid.</u>, p. 298.

he is on safe ground; after all, "a certain leeway with the facts must be granted to anyone who uses metaphor, for no metaphor is in a factual sense entirely true."[1] As a matter of fact, to determine whether a metaphor is an appropriate and true one in a court of law would be very difficult to do. If a witness were allowed, as Guido is, to express his meaning metaphorically, he might succeed "in perpetrating the most outrageous falsehoods" because of the nature of metaphor, since metaphor "takes leave of factually demonstrable relationships and communicates meaning implicitly or symbolically."[2] Thus, legally, Guido is on safe ground here because the judges cannot accuse him of perjury.

Even Guido's entrance into the chamber is part of his artistry; he is simply acting out the role he has already assigned to himself. He discusses the issues that have been introduced into the case after he has utilized his false sense of cheerfulness to call attention to himself. He points out the suffering he has experienced for the past four years and how this has centered around all the things that would be important to a human being--particularly a nobleman. These things--self-respect, family pride, a sense of the gentleman's station, prestige and honor--would be the normal motivations for murder for someone in Guido's situation. In the deepest part of himself Guido does not feel them, but he knows he is supposed to; therefore, artistically, this is

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[1] Ibid. [2] Ibid., p. 299.

the way he must portray it. Thus, he brings out immediately the family's poverty and how, as the beleaguered head of the house, he has been struggling to prevent poverty from making further inroads, and he implies that it has been a losing battle. He freely admits that there might be some truth to the rumors that he is a sour and irascible old man, but he points out that his environment has in part made him this way. He has been strict, authoritarian, humorless, because, after all, fighting to keep one's family from going under is a serious business, and there is no time for jesting.

He acknowledges the rumors that he beat his wife--the old senex married to the young girl--but he says those are just rumors; however, he does not expressly deny them. He emphasizes the spiritual suffering he has undergone at the hands of the Comparini. And if he is eventually beheaded or hanged, he wants to point out what he is being executed for: for protecting his honor against an adulterous wife who was trying to pass the Franceschini name down to a bastard son. He candidly and quite simply admits the murder. The only good that has come from his being on the rack is that it has caused him to speak in his own defense. For that, he claims, is where the truth lies. The truth is not in the murder itself, but in the interpretation of that murder. It is Guido who will serve as the judges' instrument, in order that they may see the truth for themselves. He is their guide; he knows where the truth is, and he will lead them to

it through his art.

5

Guido then proceeds to fill out his rough sketch, elaborating, detailing, expanding, on the framework he has already established--his background and upbringing, his filial obligations, his struggle against poverty, his desire to restore the family's status, his work for the Church, his admitted personality defects, his marriage to a young wife, his candid admission that he did indeed commit the murders, but only because of the torturings administered by the Comparini, and on account of the behavior of his promiscuous wife. It is a generally false picture, made up out of bits and parts of the truth.

The subject he first returns to is his early training. Guido claims that all his trouble came about as a result of his early "treading" in those paths where he was trained to go. (V, 125) He was born into the nobility and was raised as the oldest son under the yoke of its obligations. He points out he had a higher and nobler obligation--to serve the Church; this he maintains he did by being attendant to the Cardinal all those years in Rome. And, he says half-accusingly, for carrying out my noble work, I end up here before you, stiff with torture.

Guido's obvious implication is that his murder of Pompilia and the Comparini is in line with and a result of

his early training in the nobility and in his service to the Church. He was merely fulfilling his noble and religious obligations when he murdered and now he is being tortured for it. He wants to establish in the minds of the judges that murdering Pompilia, Pietro and Violante was his duty--not only to himself but to society and to God.

He begins to create a fantastic story about his background which--the way he constructs it--is not only distorted but almost totally untrue. It is a fiction which only an artist such as Guido could do justice to. "I am representative of a great line," he tells his auditors, "One of the first of the old families/In Arezzo, ancientest of Tuscan towns." (V, 140-42) For Guido's purposes, this is a brilliant beginning of his own personal history. He is appealing to very old values in this first statement. His family goes back for hundreds of years; it is a famous family, and has contributed much for the benefits of others; it is a family steeped in tradition and impresses with the hoariness of its age; it suggests respect, prestige, privilege and power.

One might note that Guido expresses these qualities not boastfully, but modestly, with the restraint characteristic of the true nobleman. He does not need to boast; his family speaks for itself. Although Guido's literal statement is almost altogether true, the implications of that statement are almost altogether false. Too, he admits with matter-of-fact candor that his family is now of the second rank in

nobility, but at one time they were of the first rank, and although many a parvenu has passed his family up, they do not have the blood line that he does. By pointing up his blood line in this way, he knows he is bound to impress the judges. His aim is to present a picture of a man proud of his lineage and willing to fight and die for it. This attitude is important later on when Guido attempts to establish as one of his motives for murdering Pompilia the fact that she had stolen the noble name of Franceschini and had already passed it down to her bastard son.

Of course none of this is true. Guido has almost no sense of history or tradition. The fact of his own nobility he takes for granted. Pride in the family name is an irrelevancy to him. His real feeling about the family centers on his bitterness against his father for leaving him in such poverty. He is cold towards his mother, hates the palace in Arezzo, and spent thirty years in Rome attempting to find a fortune so he would never have to go back. He continually made demands on his brother Paolo without the slightest feeling of gratitude in return--not that Paolo deserved it. He spent his time in Rome gambling, gaming, fencing, drinking and loafing. He has never done any work in his life, has exploited people mercilessly and indiscriminately and is by his very nature totally and incredibly evil, perhaps even outdistancing Iago in the depth of his depravity. The judges of course cannot know this. We know it because Browning has

already told us. But we are almost willing to suspend our disbelief because of the layer after layer of invention that Guido creates as he rounds out his story. It is fascinating to follow: for us, to see what fantastic lengths his fictions can carry him; for the judges, to see whether or not there is something to Guido's story, after all.

Guido explains to them how, as head of the house, he could not be a priest or a military man--the two leading professions which ordinarily would have been open to him. He maintains that he had to go to Rome at such an early age, for he could certainly not restore any part of the family's fortune in Arezzo. He tells of his disappointments in Rome and why, after thirty years, he decided to return. And he would have, except for Paolo's advice concerning marriage.

He defends his reasons for marrying such a girl as Pompilia. Though he had no money he could give her his honored name. This, he argues, is the way of the world; it was the custom, the way he and all men like him are trained. Honor of birth has value, he claims, and can be justifiably used to buy value of another sort; the social fabric itself would break if this method of sustaining one's noble family was disallowed. Honor is a privilege, after all, and may be used as a coin at the bargaining counter. Guido's references to the "social fabric" are of course accurate as far as they go. The judges know that many marriages are arranged just as he says and the custom has long been in effect and is

desirable.

Guido justifies his marriage as a marriage of convenience for both sides. As he describes the hatred and bitterness of the Comparini while they are at Arezzo, he maintains they had nobody to blame but themselves, and that when they exposed his poverty to the world, his standing and reputation were done irreparable harm, and all because of their "purblind greed." (V, 565)

As for Pompilia, was he so wrong in demanding loyalty and obedience from her? One can imagine the judges nodding their heads in assent. The law says that a wife must stay with her husband, no matter what her parents do. "Who sets this law aside/ In my particular case?" he asks pointedly. He admits the difference in their ages, but argues that a woman who is the "nobler of the sex" would have been successful in sharing her life with him. He believes in the good old way, "Believe a woman still may take a man" and for that short period we call life, this woman can, "for the soul's sake, understand the fault/ Of armour frayed by fighting." (V, 598-602)

Guido is here drawing a picture of himself as the aging, embattled and still heroic knight--his armor no longer shining but frayed--whose young wife would have all the more reason to stand by him. The obligation he incurred when he married her was "just to practise mastery, prove my mastership," as it was Pompilia's duty to submit herself and afford

him pleasure. (V, 716-18) There is no point in his teaching the judges what marriage means. They know that God and law say it is for the husband to be master in his own house. This was the custom of the time and the judges know it and agree with it. He compares it, in an eloquent analogy, with the marriage of the monk to the Church--the monk always subordinate in the relationship and fulfilling himself through the reflected glory of the Church. (V, 723-53)

If I was over-harsh, he tells them,the worse in the wife who does not try to soften me; this is her wifely duty. If I was too clumsy, too unromantic, and perhaps too rough, she will not "mend the case" by biting and clawing and fighting back, (V, 751-53) or else I may get rougher.

The credit is due me, Guido claims, for taking up Pompilia's cause after Pietro and Violante were shamelessly voicing her illegitimacy all over Rome. She, for her part, should have renounced her father and mother for damning her to such infamy. And, Guido says, this is the reason why he forged Pompilia's letter to Paolo, because he was merely helping her to carry out her duty. "I confess all--let it be understood--/ And deny nothing!" (V, 846-47) By writing out the letter in pencil and them making Pompilia trace over it in pen, he was teaching her what her duty was.

When Pompilia began to realize her beauty and began to feel the stirrings of youth and recklessness inside her, did she resist all the attentions the young men of Arezzo

began to pay her? It would seem, since she knew she was the daughter of a common whore, as though this might cause her to want to be even more chaste than the average girl. But, Guido claims--in one of his baldest lies--the exact opposite was the case. And while he was working day and night struggling to keep their heads above water, she was already meeting Caponsacchi, and their illicit affair had begun. "Caponsacchi," he says, and the judges are bound to appreciate his humor here, "thought the nearest way/ To his church was some half-mile round by my door." (V, 939-40)

If they wonder why he did not do something to stop her reckless behavior at the time, he admits that he was too tolerant; he used threats when he should have used force. The course that he finally took--murdering all three of them--was the "course a wise man takes." (V, 979)

Although Guido's "quasi-candid" views on love and marriage might seem cruel today, they were "in accord with the opinion of the Italy of his time."[1] And they are quasi-candid for the simple reason that we have no evidence that Guido either accepted or rejected them. Love and marriage, for Guido, merely offered more opportunities for exploitation. He would not be concerned with having "views" about them. Instead, he formulates and presents those views that he knows the typical nobleman of his day has, and he seeks to establish his own motivations through those views.

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[1]Cook, Commentary, p. 93.

When he describes his marriage as a business arrangement, he is describing a procedure common in his time and acceptable to the judges. When he asserts that he had to be master in his own house, not only because it is man's law, but God's, he knows the judges will emphatically agree with him. In fact, the only place where Guido obviously feels he is on weak ground is when he is hard pressed to explain why he did not put a stop to Pompilia's reckless behavior in Arezzo, and why he did not kill them when he caught them. This would have been the natural thing to do for a person in his position according to the custom of the time. Guido's explanation is that he thought threats and loud talk on his part would be enough, but he admits now that he was foolish in believing this. Instead of brandishing his sword, he says, he should have used it. (V, 980-81)

Threats did no good, for on that day when he awoke to find "noon in my face, a crowd in my room,/ Fumes in my brain, fire in my throat," (V, 990-91) and a wife gone God knows where, the money-coffer ransacked, the closets empty, the devils were indeed making merry over his "tesselated floor," romping "around my broken gods/ Over my desecrated hearth." (V, 990-93, 1031-35) Guido pauses, then adds, "So much/ For the terrible effect of threatening, Sirs!" (V, 1035-36)

6

Guido reminds the Court of its original reaction when

he caught Pompilia and Caponsacchi and brought charges against them in Rome. I called in law, he says, and they accused me of shrinking "'from gallant readiness and risk,/ Were coward: the thing's inexplicable else.'" (V, 1091-92) But "sweet my lords," he begs them, please "inform my ignorance." If we suppose for a moment that I was afraid, "no lion but a lamb," does that deprive me of my right as a lamb "And give my fleece and flesh to the first wolf?" Guido here is almost stretching his artistry too far in using the lamb analogy as a comparison to his own temperament. He quickly abandons it by asserting that gentleness and timidity were not the problems anyway. He insists that, as a nobleman, he was brought up "at the very feet of law," a man who would await the approval of the Courts before he would ever clench a fist at an outrage, "much less stab!" (V, 1106-08) He insists that he was "ready enough to rise at the right time," whenever he received the sanction of law.

He admits that Caponsacchi and Pompilia never made any secret of their affair, and that during the first trial he became the laughing stock precisely because he carried out his obligation by calling in law. "They never tried to put on mask at all," he says in mock-surprise. Being a person who has been wearing masks all his life, Guido knows the implications of playing a role. The ironic part is that Guido is privately aware that what he is saying is true, since Caponsacchi and Pompilia never found it necessary to put on

masks after they met; they were never anything other than their true selves.

Once he had the case before the judges, however, all he could get was the terrible compromise decision. The Court judged that Pompilia was driven to flight by what "she somehow took for cruelty." (V, 1184) It is not, the Court had argued, that this was actually the case, but the way it seemed to her. Therefore, the Court decided the end result was lawful because, in order to save a life, "there's no risk should stay our leap." (V, 1188) If this is so, Guido maintains, "It follows that all means to the lawful end/ Are lawful likewise,--poison, theft and flight." (V, 1189-90),

Guido, now established as the embattled nobleman and wronged husband, has more or less equated his status with that of the judges, and is thus in a position to attack their decision. Since they did indeed punish Pompilia and Caponsacchi, then it must have been for the adultery, and if it was, then that must give him the right in "the riddle, since right must be!" (V, 1239)

Returning to Arezzo after the trial, Guido was mocked and ridiculed beyond expectation. He tells the Court that he tried to be calm and objective, knowing that he had done the right thing. "I played the man as I best might, bade friends/ Put non-essentials by and face the fact." (V, 1278-80) He still, he insists, had faith in law. He filed for divorce and waited in the face of Arezzo's snickering. "'Laugh who

wins!'" he told them. "'You shall not laugh me out of faith in law!'" Guido pauses, stretching his portrait of the aristocrat who believes in the time-honored customs sanctioned by God and society as far as it can go. "'I listen, through all your noise, to Rome!'"

But he could only carry his faith so far, he tells them. His picture of himself as the good citizen who served God and Law is now almost a finished product. The letters he began to receive from Rome informing him of the progress of his suits in court were accompanied by further information in regard to how he was being laughed at by the general populace. He was led to understand that even his friends in Rome spoke "'Of the old outwitted husband.../ Pitted against a brace of juveniles.'" (V, 1355-56) They regarded Caponsacchi as "'A brisk priest who is versed in Ovid's art/ More than his Summa.'" (V, 1357-58) Pompilia was the "'gamesome wife/ Able to act Corinna without book,'" and the Comparini were those "'waggish parents who played dupes/ To dupe the duper.'" (V, 1358-61) The way his friends in Rome saw it, even the situation in Arezzo had its comic aspects. In short, the whole thing was simply a delight from the start, and Paolo, in the midst of suits and countersuits, suddenly sold "'House and goods.../ Leaves Rome,--whether for France or Spain, who knows?'" (V, 1370-71)

If the judges would only try to visualize the kind of life he was leading in Arezzo at the time he heard the news of

Paolo's departure. It was a chilly autumn day, he tells them. He sat in the somber gallery upstairs in his palace with a feeling of hopelessness and futility. His mother was sick in bed. His brother Girolamo was walking his misery away by hunting along the mountain-side. One might note here the effective use to which Guido is putting his artistic technique in creating a single image for the judges. The scene perfectly symbolizes most of the points he has spoken of to this point--his self-effacement, his obligations as head of the house, his poverty, the hurt, bitter feelings arising from Pompilia's betrayal and flight and the public's snickering, the sense of isolation, and the realization that he must fight his battle alone. Guido had dinner alone that evening. He ate "the coarse bread" and drank the watered wine. Within himself was a great struggle, and there, he says, at that point, he reached some decisions. "'I am irremediably beaten here,'" (V, 1393) is what he told himself. Pompilia and Caponsacchi, Pietro and Violante, have "'Made me their spoil and prey from first to last.'" (V, 1396)

Guido's claim is that he, the ethically just, hard-working, scrupulously honest man was the victim all along. Add to this his desertion by his brother in Rome, Paolo, and he can only conclude that they had "caught me in the cavern where I fell." (V, 1409) They were all working against him and they "Covered my loudest cry for human aid/ With this enormous paving stone of shame." (V, 1410-11)

Guido here is furiously painting his false portrait. He portrays himself as the man of integrity who is at first shocked into passivity by the evil he finds in those people he had trusted. Even God, he hints, had deserted him. (V, 1414-18) He compares his condition to one of his ancestors who had taken part in the Crusades and had been betrayed by the feigning of a girl. His ancestor rushed to free her from her ravisher only to find himself caught in an ambush by her friends who flayed him and killed him "while she clapped her hands and laughed." (V, 1424) Pompilia did the same to him, he says, and he was brutally ambushed first by Violante and Pietro, then by Caponsacchi, then by the Courts, and now by the whole structure of the customs and time-honored traditions of Roman society.

He said tragically, "'I am the last of my line which will not suffer any more.'" (V, 1426-27) But at the time when he said this, while he was still in Arezzo, he had one compensation. And here Guido puts the finishing touches to his portrait. He can hardly expect to add any more to his story or it will seem an exaggeration even to the judges. Thank God he had no children who would have to bear the same heartbreak. Here Guido suspensefully leads up the the climax. He has prepared his audience carefully and now must drive his points home.

What possible reaction could he have had, other than fire and rage, when he received the news that Pompilia had had

a baby? He had thought that there was very little else they could do to torture him, but he suddenly realized that it was not the end but the beginning. They were just getting started. The baby was no Franceschini, but a Caponsacchi and he will brandish my name freely; or, if he is mine, the disgrace of his mother will follow him always. But, Guido maintains, his "inmost heart" told him that the child was indeed a bastard and none of his. And Pompilia and Caponsacchi made a nest for him, "As the manner is of vermin, in my flesh." (V, 1538)

7

Guido argues for the incontestable rightness of what he did. It is God's law, he insists. Was I supposed to let things go on and on, rotting and corrupting my flesh and soul? "I appeal to God," he says. What does He say about it? And what does Nature teach "when I look to learn?" (V, 1542-43) Why, he says, God and Nature tell me "that I am alive, am still a man." (V, 1544) And as a man, with the hand of God touching me, there can be "No more of law." Law no longer applies. "A voice beyond the law/ Enters my heart" and asks "Quis est pro Domino?" (V, 1548-49)

With almost breathless dramatics, Guido describes the circumstances surrounding the murder. He describes how the four hands he picked from the field were staunchly loyal and with him from the start; how his mind reeled and things seemed out of focus as they rode to Rome, so overcome by tortured

suffering was he; how it was the absolute feeling inside him that he must kill them because it was an order from God and was like stamping out Satan and declaring to the world the one supreme law--"that right is right." (V, 1578) He discusses how he hesitated once they arrived in Rome on Christmas Eve and paused to consider the meaning of Christ's message of "peace on earth and good will toward men." But behind the halo of the Holy Infant he saw Satan lurking and peace on earth came to mean his irrevocable duty to avenge the wrongs against him and against God. His picture is here so brilliant, so charged with motivation, as he calls on God's law, as he reminds us of the meaning of the birth of Christ, it has everything that the judges would need to accept his story.

Yet, he continues, he was willing, even at the last, to grant one concession. If she did not open the door when he said "Caponsacchi" he would grant them all life. The only thing he felt certain of, he says, was his will to do right. Why, even now,--"I pray God that I think aright!"--I don't believe I would have murdered them had Pompilia or Pietro answered the door. "Had either of these but opened, I had paused." (V, 1648) But "it was she the hag, she that brought hell/ For a dowry" (V, 1649-50) who answered and she sealed the doom of all three.

I had to kill her, he argues. There was a feeling of the deepest, most real, most justifiable sense of rightness inside him, "one/ Immeasurable everlasting wave of a need/ To

abolish that detested life." (V, 1661-63) Here, we can rest assured, Guido is telling the absolute truth.

8

By this murder, Guido claims, he purged himself. He had his sense again and his soul was "safe from the serpents." (V, 1678) Now I can sleep at night, he says, now I can live. Now I am sane.

The rest of the trial is up to the judges. When they hear Caponsacchi's testimony, it will no doubt have more polish than his, but at least his is true. "The trial is no concern of mine," he says. "The main of the care is over." (V, 1699-1700) He wants to give the picture of a man who knows that whatever happens, he has done the right thing. If the Court wants to do the right thing, then it is obvious that they must set him free. He cannot express to them the feeling of relief he has had since he killed his enemies.

"Let me begin to live again," he entreats them In this that they style murder, "I did God's bidding and man's duty, so, breathe free." (V, 1702-03) My rage is over. The disease that was eating away at me I have cured. "I am myself and whole now." (V, 1707)

He feels a wonder in the simple joy of living. He can see and hear again. His body feels youthful and playful. He appreciates again the "healthy taste of food and feel of clothes." (V, 1710) He is ready to take to the "common

life" once more and that in itself is reason enough why he should not be put to death. He has that "willingness to live." (V, 1713)

He points out to them that he made no real effort to escape after he left the scene of the murder because he knew he was in the right. He insists too, that had he not felt vindicated, he could have paid hired assassins to carry out the job secretly. Now, he argues, it is over. "Health is returned, and sanity of soul." (V, 1740) He has the instinct to life. I want to save my life, he tells the judges, not only to serve myself and Rome as a useful citizen, but to serve God. "God shall not lose a life/ May do Him further service." Here on earth, the judges are his "last hope" and they must see their duty just as Guido saw his.

And his final defense is one of law. "I claim law," he cries to them. It is the "higher law whereof your law/ O' the land is humbly representative." (V, 1762-63) Based on this higher law, he asks, is there anything that I have been accused of for which I have not furnished a defense?

Guido argues for what he tells the judges are his deepest feelings, just as Caponsacchi is to argue for his in the next monologue. God breathes his verdict to me, Guido claims. He has already informed me that I am innocent. And God's verdicts are passed on down to each court until they reach "Man's conscience, custom, manners,"--all those things that attempt to establish "God's verdict in determinable

words.' (V, 1771-75)

The rules of law here on earth--that whole body of jurisprudence--are really "What simply sparkled in men's eyes before." My whole life and what it stands for must be considered in this light. And if it is, then "What has Society to charge me with?" (V, 1788)

You know who I am, he tells them. You know how I long served the Church while here in Rome. You know that I was exonerated by the Governor and Archbishop in Arezzo. You are perhaps aware too, he insinuates, that were I a more powerful noble, you would be more inclined to favor my case. As he builds to the final climax, with feigned passion and self-righteous indignation, Guido recklessly and daringly castigates the Court. Your equals in Arezzo, he points out to them, cleared me; so too did the Tuscan court. "Look to it," he warns them,."or allow me freed so far!" (V, 1866)

He returns to some of the more intricate points in the case, particularly his behavior during Pompilia's flight and its consequences. He insists that he comes before the judges with "clean hands." (V, 1867) He asserts that during the previous trial the Court allowed that he had not wronged his wife. Actually, in the Court's compromise decision, the judges avoided the problem. He admits that law gives "license" to murder adulterous wives and their paramours but he was patient; the world, however, called it cowardice. He insists that in the compromise decision, since Caponsacchi

and Pompilia both received punishment, they must have been guilty. He reminds the judges that the Arezzo court sentenced Pompilia to life imprisonment. The Roman Court, which could not deal with Pompilia's robbery of Guido's goods, but only with the adultery, gave Pompilia a month in a convent and then allowed her to move into that house which was the destination of her escape to begin with. Guido is here again criticizing the Court; he knows that the judges that are listening to him now are the same ones who were involved in the compromise decision eight months earlier.

Guido has placed himself squarely in the right. He can afford now to chastise the Court, since his criticism logically follows from the false picture of the case he has given. For if he is indeed all the things he says, and if it happened the way he says it happened, the Court deserves his rebuke. He would be suspect if he did not give it to them. He further criticizes them by stating that their "cure" (their compromise decision) only made the disease worse. For once Violante was back in Rome she caused him more misery than she ever did in Arezzo. She was like a reptile who crushed and coiled itself around him. And, after squeezing the life out of him, her aim was to renew his life through his son, Gaetano. His son would have had no chance, Guido argues, being raised "By that thief, poisoner and adultress/ I call Pompilia," (V, 1976) and that perjured priest, the "foster-father, Caponsacchi's self." (V, 1979)

Can the Court look on him and say that he did not do the very thing the judges thought to do in the previous case? Has he not "thoroughly trampled out sin's life at last?" (V, 1989) Has he not been "law's mere executant" carrying out law's sentence? Absolve me then, he enjoins them. His plea becomes passionate, idealistic, as he has now come full circle in his drama, from being thought of as a murderer to being though of as the noblest defender of human rights. "Protect your own defender,--save me, Sirs!" he urges them. Do not be complacent and play into the hands of the devil.

He tells them that now more than ever, he has so much to live for: there is his aging mother in Arezzo, his fugitive brother Paolo, his misguided youngest brother, Girolamo. Moreover, he wants his son, Gaetano, "Whom law makes mine,--I take him at your word." (V, 2027)

With these behind him, he can go forward, "face new times, the better day." The times will be made better by the very decision the judges will make regarding his case. He argues for a revival of the old Rome, full of "honest women and strong men,/ Manners reformed, old habits back once more." He wants the basic values of living restored, "The wholesome household rule in force again,/ Husbands once more God's representative." (V, 2042-43) He presents himself as a symbol of this revival; his case can itself be the beginning of a new society with the Church and the family at its

foundation, "Wives like the typical Spouse once more, and Priests/ No longer men of Belial." (V, 2044-45)

And he wants to be able to watch his son grow up in this kind of healthy environment, so that in later years he can tell him of how it all came about, how "The task seemed superhuman, still/ I dared and did it, trusting God and law." (V, 2050-51)

And after this beautiful piece of sophistry Guido ends his speech the way he started it, by referring to his torture. The difference in what he says, however, is enormous. Whereas before, his pseudo-cheerfulness was a way of criticizing the Court, now he uses the torture in retrospect, as it were. He has put it all behind him, is what he is saying. He has been through the fires of hell. Most of his torment was inflicted because of other people's hatred. The torture of the Court is one of those accidents that always seem to happen when one is being subjected to a long siege of torment anyway. The "final" torture thus becomes a device Guido uses to place himself above the ethical values of the judges and "normal" citizens like them. He has the true values of the old Rome. In this way Guido ends masterfully by establishing the moral truth of his superiority which he achieved through heroism, courage and suffering.

If God should stoop to kiss his hand, he says, and give a start at the torture the hand has had to undergo, Guido will only smile and explain to Him that "'That was an accident/

I' the necessary process.'" (V, 2055-56) When one is searching for truth, accidents do happen, torture-irons are misapplied; but one is willing to risk pain and suffering, and one comes to understand how people with only normal understanding might mistakenly administer such pain. One cannot blame them because they can not really know. Thus his torture, he tells God, "'is hardly misfortune, and no fault at all.'" (V, 2058)

9

The torch that Guido uses to light up his dark world is the light of his artistic imagination. His torch is his artist's brush. As he holds his torch outward, he lights up portions of his cavern of darkness; the blackness closes in after him the deeper he gets into the caverns of his soul. This takes place largely in his second monologue; in the first we see the light of his unquestionably brilliant artistry rather than the darkness; it is a false light just as it is a false art. In the second monologue we come to see how Guido's very creativity is what destroys him. Art imposes order, and Guido sees the necessity of constructing an order in his first monologue. He imposes this order on his world, gives that world meaning and purpose; its foundation is an unchanging ethical center where the "real" values prevail. The details of Guido's picture are entirely contrary to what Guido actually believes. We might regard them as rationali-

zations except that Guido is aware of their falseness and would never offer them in seriousness. Although he wants to fool the judges, Guido has no desire to fool himself. Wholeheartedly committed to evil, Guido feels no need to justify it to himself even though he might to the judges. Evil, for him, is its own justification. He feels no need to philosophize about it.

As an artist Guido knows that he has something working on his side. He knows that many of the things he says are true or in part true. It is true that the Comparini duped him, for example. It is true that he and his family received much abuse from public gossip. It is true that Pompilia deserted him in the company of a sophisticated priest who had gained some notoriety for his activities with women. It is true that Guido attempted to seek redress in the Courts rather than killing Pompilia and the Comparini outright.

Guido knows that many of the facts are on his side. As an artist, he is not short on materials to work with. He obviously sees the artistic possibilities. He knows he must create a drama that has a beginning, middle and end, where one event follows another because of the motivations of the characters involved. He must establish himself as the hero of the piece, and the others as the villains. And he must show that he himself underwent change as a person--both psychologically and spiritually. He must show, in the best tradition of the heroic saga, how the events conspired to

bring out the best within his own personality; how his development was in a step-by-step direction toward higher spiritual fulfillment. And in the best sense of tragedy, he must show how, because the times have been out of joint, he has undergone torment and suffering in order to set them aright.

Guido is thus not only poet and playwright; he is also the near-tragic hero--the person who emerges from the fires of tragedy and hell in order to serve as God's avenger here on earth. He admits to personality inadequacies on his own part. He admits to having perhaps delayed too long in Rome searching for a fulfillment that never came. His point is that the qualities were latent in himself and that by murdering, he put these qualities into action, made them operative in his own society, in order to reactivate and revitalize that society so that it would be a reality rather than a mirage.

One cannot fail to notice the overwhelming parallels to Caponsacchi. Such parallels cannot help but add to the depths of Guido's subtlety and insight. It is as if Guido was appropriating for himself all the qualities that really belong to Caponsacchi. It is an unconscious--or perhaps conscious--admission on Guido's part that Caponsacchi is the real hero of the drama. For it was not Guido, but Caponsacchi, who had the heroic qualities within him, waiting to be brought out. And it was Caponsacchi who is really God's agent and who had repeatedly put off making a commitment to God and who

instead, played the gallant to the young ladies in Arezzo and engaged in the function of being social priest. It was Caponsacchi who needed a spiritual force such as Pompilia to rouse him from his inactivity and into action. It was Caponsacchi, and not Guido, who recognized his deepest feelings as being the true ones and finally committed himself to their implications. It was Caponsacchi who will later insist to these same judges that one must act, one must put into action the principles upon which he rests all his cases.

The parallels between the two men are simply too close to be denied. And it can only point to one thing: that Guido is consciously--perhaps preconsciously--aware of the underlying truths of all the things that Caponsacchi and Pompilia stand for. As a person, he knows that his only chance is to reverse these roles, to make the reality which Caponsacchi and Pompilia have created, his reality. As an artist, Guido realizes that his artistic duty is to expropriate these truths of Caponsacchi and Pompilia and make them the foundation of his own painting; this is the only kind of order he can possibly impose upon his false portrait. It is not really his reality. When he uses his artistry in the second monologue in a last desperate and defiant attempt to impose order upon his "real" reality, Guido's world shatters and breaks into fragments. Just as goodness and truth require order and purpose and a true set of values, so the terrible truth of absolute evil requires not order, but chaos and destruction.

In the first monologue Guido succeeds as an artist, because his picture of himself and his world has the truth of Pompilia and Caponsacchi's reality at its base. He creates a sort of myth of himself as the St. George of the piece rather than Caponsacchi, who has claim on the role. In the second monologue, the real myth is disclosed in all the depths of its horror. There he casts off his "sheep's clothing" and shows his "wolf's shag." We meet Satan himself, holding out the light of his painter's brush, trying to sustain the real myth of himself through his artistry; there we see how he must have light in order to carry out the blackness which is lodged in the dark caverns of his soul. There, Guido's artistry has to fail.

In using the quality of moral creativity which belongs to Pompilia and Caponsacchi, Guido carefully demonstrates to the judges the nature of his own moral and spiritual development. It is a process undergone only through action. Guido must show them the inevitability of the murder as the final step in his educational quest for truth.

When he first appears before the judges, he knows that he is being regarded--in part--as a murderer. It is that attitude that he must change. When he comes into the chamber, he seems cheerful in spite of all his sufferings. But he presents the picture of someone weak and insignificant. Through his own artistry he begins to grow in stature before their eyes. In touching upon various points in the case, he

mentions his ill-health, his age, his appearance, his sullen personality, his unromantic attitudes. There is not much potential here, and he must succeed in showing how he moved away from this position toward God's light.

As we read further into the monologue, we see how Guido subtly adds dimension to his personality as he slowly converts his character into that of the Christian knight-hero--one who combines the romantic notions of chivalry and courage with the Christian ethic. He is old and his armor is somewhat frayed from doing battle. His face shows the depths of suffering. We learn, too, that what was once thought cowardice on his part was in reality Christian patience--a patience which stemmed from his deep faith in justice and the legal machinery which society had set up to administer justice. But Guido, with more insight than others, saw that when a society neglects to carry out its own beliefs, man-made justice and its instrument--the law--break down, and that it is up to individual human beings like Guido--people who are unique because of their will-to-believe--who must restore them to their original purpose.

We see that Guido's heroic possibilities have, in the past, been more of a promise than a reality. His underlying traits have remained hidden because of his self-effacing temperament. But once he is put to the test and finds himself under duress and spiritual torment, his heroic and Christian qualities begin to reveal themselves. We receive an early

indication of this when Guido slowly becomes more manly in the monologue as he speaks of his God-given and wholesome authority to be master in his own house.

In the end we discover that all the things he believed in and had fought for were at stake. As a servant to God he could do no other than what he did. Greed, avarice, cruelty, maliciousness--all the things that the "world's insight" had accused him of--are not even mentioned by Guido as motives. He does not lower himself to answer these charges, since, from the picture he paints of his own motivations, they could not possibly have even been in his mind.

In the end, he is God's avenger, fighting heroically to restore the traditional values upon which the old Rome was founded--the belief in honor, truth and dignity, the respect for that instrument--law--which society designated to sustain and uphold these values and make them truly operative. He emerges as the very "soldier-saint" that Pompilia sees in Caponsacchi; he is the embattled, aging Christian knight, the Crusader, the upholder of law and liberty. As the sun sets on his world, he shows the courage and the conviction to re-create that world anew.

Such is the picture that Guido paints, dazzling us by the flashing darkness of his world.

CHAPTER VIII

CAPONSACCHI, THE FIRST EXPERIMENTALIST

1

Caponsacchi is appearing before the judges for a second time. He knows them well. They are the same three that he faced eight months before in May of 1697, when he was sent into exile because he helped Pompilia in her flight from Guido.

At first he confronts them with anger and sardonic contempt. What they had thought were the vapors of an illicit romance he now shows to be "this sudden smoke from hell." (VI, 2) And none of the judges is laughing now, he reminds them, while before there was the "blameless shrug," the "permissible smirk," the "titter stifled in the hollow palm," as the judges all winked at the sly young priest's indiscretion. We too were young once, they had told him.

Now the Court is obliged to call upon him in a different category. He is not on trial. In a sense, he implies, they are. The magnanimous Law that Bottini ("Law's son") is later to personalize and invest with such maternal sanctity finds itself in a rather uncomfortable role. The formulas it applied at Caponsacchi's trial the preceding May have dis-

solved into uselessness. The judges, with a certain amount of discomfiture, are compelled to ask Caponsacchi for help. He must tell his tale again. He cannot help but point out that his story will be no different than it was when he related it on the first occasion. Nothing, for his own part, has changed. No, he tells them, the change is in the Court itself. In May, they greeted his tale with laughter. They believed he had simply had the bad luck to have been caught--in flagrante delicto as it were. They could not take him seriously. Nor does he entirely blame them, since he was aware that the judges knew him by reputation and had no doubt heard of some of his other pecadilloes.

He appears in the court in the function of amicus curiae, summoned by them for any light he might be able to throw upon the murder.[1] (VI, 1636) In contrasting their laughter at his earlier appearance in May with their seriousness now, he indicts them by implication, because their seriousness is not really needed now, since it will not save Pompilia's life. Before, he says, he was the "jocular piece of punishment," and "now you sit as grave, stare as aghast/ As if I were a phantom." (VI, 25-6) They plead with him to "Counsel the Court in this extremity." (VI, 28) Now it is his turn to laugh, but like the judges' seriousness, his

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[1]Cook, Commentary, p. 112. Cook demonstrates how Browning solved the problem of including Caponsacchi in the trial, since in the actual trial, there is no evidence that he was called.

laughter would be useless and hollow.

Let me show you "the mystery of this murder," he tells them. "This deed, you saw begin--why does its end/ Surprise you?" (VI, 77-8) Humorously, they had told him before that Law did not need his help, that Law could watch over Pompilia's innocence, if she indeed were innocent, that it was not his office to carry her off with such dramatic suddenness.

But they did not watch over her. And now they must ask for his help. Yet why tell the tale again, he hammers at them. "For what?/ Pompilia is only dying while I speak!" (VI, 46-7) He reminds them that when Christ was crucified the soldiers merrily cast dice for the coat of him whose blood was still fresh before them. And Pompilia, whom he regards with just the same kind of reverence as he regards Christ, demanded at the first trial the seriousness which she is getting belatedly now. But her blood, he tries to show by his analogy (John xix, 23, 24) was actually flowing then. Guido "has butchered her accordingly,/ As she foretold and as myself believed." (VI, 42-3) But the judges were like the soldiers, full of mirth. Why, he asks with theatrical suddenness, are you not laughing now?

2

The Pope, when later reviewing the flight from Arezzo, comments on the theatrical aspects of Caponsacchi's behavior.

(X, 1128-37) There was, the Pope points out, something of the fool, the hypocrite, and the masquerader, in his actions. Indeed, Caponsacchi is not unaware of the dramatic possibilities of his present situation, as he stands before the judges. He is a man, we gradually discover, who plays many different roles in and out of society. His role-playing and stage acting, however, are not to be equated with evasion, glibness, or the fate of a man who cannot distinguish his mask from his face. With Caponsacchi, as we shall see, it is a deliberate trying-out of new roles, testing new ideas, attempting new and hesitant approaches towards understanding the world in which he lives. For this "prince of sonneteers and lutanists," it is all part of his slowly and painfully evolving artistic consciousness.

He reminds the judges that they had viewed the entire affair incorrectly because they had made the mistake of identifying his sensibilities with theirs. Caponsacchi is trying to make a case for himself, although he himself is not always conscious of it, as a person who had succeeded in transfiguring the real objects of his everyday world and seeing them in a way in which the judges will never be able to see them unless he can awaken in them the same sense of creativity which he has found in himself. The judges had, he knew, viewed him as "the hot-heated youth" who now "lets his soul show," and who now exposes "The mundane love that's sin and scandal too." (VI, 129-30)

To state it matter-of-factly, Caponsacchi wants desperately to make a case for his own mythic structuring of reality. Although this contention will be dwelt on at more length in the next chapter it is best to state it now because early in his "counsel" to the judges he is obviously not sure that he understands it. Caponsacchi has already separated himself from the institutional ethic that the judges follow; thus he knows that he is up against it. How change their mind, he thinks, when he has not yet even been able to resolve the conflict within himself? To them, it has to be a mundane love. Spiritual love, for them, is a dead myth. It has no more reality for them than Fra Lippo's projected painting of the Madonna which he plans to re-vitalize by sticking his head in at the bottom of the painting. Caponsacchi wants to make, in this world of dead Law which he faces, a living reality out of a myth which he knows the judges regard as unreal. Later on in the monologue he tells them, with severe anguish in his voice, that his rescue of Pompilia was something he did, exercising his own creative abilities, and then acting. It was, he says, "my miracle/ Self-authorized." (VI, 920) I made it, he says, without help from judges, from Law, from learning, from a riddled, fragmented society. Law and society generally form the outer fringes of his world. At the hard center is his feeling that some kind of "bending down," a hand reaching out, is at the heart of his convictions about life and moral purpose and action. He tries to explain

to them that he learned this from Pompilia. After he sees her in the window she comes out on the terrace: "she could almost touch/ My head if she bent down; and she did bend,/ While I stood still as stone, all eye, all ear." (VI, 722-24) But he feels a conflict within himself because he is unable to reconcile his orthodox function as a priest in the infected Arezzo environment with his partially realized success as a maker of living myths.[1]

Even within this uncertainty, however, lies the positive belief that nothing can be done unless one acts. We cannot, he argues, discover the truth without action of some sort. And it is Caponsacchi's concern, as it ostensibly is the judges', to establish the truth. He wants to "Burn out my soul in showing you the truth." (VI, 149) Yet he is at pains to show them that the truth is not an entity that lies whole somewhere, waiting to be uncovered. Truth is something which grows, evolves and changes. Truth is something which is in part created by the very people who are engaged in a search for it. Caponsacchi actively employs the legend of the "quest" motif in his search, because the notion of the quest requires more than depositions and testimony and talk;

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[1]My colleague, Robert Stevens, states the problem in another way: "Caponsacchi's education to truth results from his bilateral quest for fulfillment. His conscious search is for spiritual reality; his mythological search is for the fulfillment of his various identities." See "Robert Browning As A Myth-Maker in The Ring and the Book" (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Department of English, University of Oklahoma), p. 87.

it requires action.

The last time he stood before them, they had told him what a priest's duties were. But he wants them to understand that a man's duty, "be he in priesthood or at plough," or sitting on a judge's bench, is that "he is bound, better or worse, to act." (VI, 159) And he wants to make it clear that on his previous appearance before them it was their mistake, not his, and that they must acknowledge it. Pompilia and he are both out of it. It is the attitude of the judges which is now important. He tells them bluntly, "You were wrong, you see." (VI, 141) Certainly the world will not come to an end because of their error, and other mistakes will be made. The important thing now is that they realize the implications of the discovery which he and Pompilia have made. He wants to show them the "truth/ For a moment, show Pompilia who was true!/ Not for her sake, but yours." (VI, 171-73)

Caponsacchi dimly perceives that his ability to re-order and change the objects of his reality must extend beyond his own personality. He must be able to share his creativity with others in a dynamic interaction which demands that each person derive his creative inspiration from the world in which he lives, but that each person also contribute to the world his own creative abilities.

3

In his earlier appearance before the judges Caponsacchi

was unable to convince them that Guido had written the letters presumably from Pompilia, and that Guido had intercepted Caponsacchi's letters and sent on to Pompilia letters of his own invention but with the priest's forged signature. The judges could hardly take him seriously since they probably knew that he had written many another billet in his time or had advised other young gallants on how to compose theirs. In fact, the whole episode fits what they knew of the young priest's general reputation. The problem, as they saw it, lay in his surprising lack of discretion.

Caponsacchi cannot offer, even now, any factual proof that Pompilia did not write the letters to him. He is unable to prove that Guido intercepted his own letters and composed them anew. The reader, at this point, might feel obliged to search carefully through the imaginative evidence that Caponsacchi does offer. The passionate young priest is absolutely convinced of Guido's evil, and was before the murder. But how can the judges be convinced, in spite of all that has gone before, that Caponsacchi is right?

Caponsacchi answers the judges with a double analogy. He had told them that he had once seen a painting of the Madonna by Raphael hung in his church one day. When he saw Pompilia he was reminded of this painting. He asks them to recall the painting again. What if, he says, a sly verger had at that point sidled up to him with a scorpion, claiming it too had been made by Raphael, mere venom from the Madonna's

mouth? It would obviously be absurd. Thus, he can no more believe that the Madonna's mouth could issue forth venom than that Pompilia could have written the letters. He felt the poison in them from the start, and since he has already established for himself the Madonna-like qualities of Pompilia, he knew, with imaginative rather than factual reasoning, that Pompilia could not have written the letters. This is more than enough proof for him.

The picture of the Madonna he remembers begins to be more than a mere analogy in his mind. He begins to alternate between an allusion to the painting and the window where he expects Guido to ambush him. There is indeed a scorpion threatening Pompilia, and Caponsacchi fuses both analogies for the first time when he says "the pest/ Was far too near the picture, anyhow." (VI, 679-80) He is now no longer speaking analogously. The scorpion is not part of the painting, yet there <u>is</u> a painting and it is no longer the orthodox picture by Raphael which Caponsacchi is referring to. No, the "pest" Guido is too near the picture of Pompilia. "I will to the window," he says, and the reader gets the first scant impression that Caponsacchi is seeing the window in more than just a concrete way.

But Caponsacchi must make the judges understand this use of the imagination on his part. He wants to show them, by using his own creative imagination (so they can themselves exercise the same ability) that he knew Pompilia did not

write the letters. He can only answer them figuratively and metaphorically, because the factual evidence is not enough. And Caponsacchi would insist, as Browning actually did (in I, 705), that his fancy is one fact the more, that his fancy is needed to inform the proceedings of the trial. In the final analysis, Caponsacchi can only answer them mythically. With his knowledge of the Madonna's legendary history, and her desire to "bend down" to help suffering humanity, Caponsacchi exercises not merely a symbolic transfer from the Madonna to Pompilia. He begins to transfigure what he knows of the one into the other. It is not an instantaneous process, although the feelings that inspire his growing artistry are quite immediate. Such is the way that he comes to know Pompilia's "truth."

Now he senses that he must accept Guido's challenge and go to the window. And what he sees there, in a single instant in time, helps him finally to fuse the painting of the Madonna with the window-picture which he will paint of Pompilia. But it is not possible for the reader to understand Caponsacchi's art unless he also perceives the manner in which Caponsacchi slowly separates himself from the authoritative sources of faith and love, Christianity and Law. As the Pope is later to point out, "Here comes the first experimentalist/ In the new order of things." (X, 1909-10)

CHAPTER IX

CAPONSACCHI'S CREATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

1

As Caponsacchi continues his impassioned speech to the judges the reader learns more and more about the transfiguration that has taken place in his life and his art.

To begin with, Caponsacchi is regarded by the world-at-large as a potentially productive man; he is a member of the nobility, representing the aristocracy of the human spirit; he is priest, scholar, courtier, and comes from one of the most prominent families in Arezzo. He is supposed to be one of the finest representatives of society, with his duties laid out before him. Yet, before his meeting with Pompilia, he is stagnating. In his occupation as priest, he has materialistically been very successful. He is a young man who "bears watching" by his superiors. Within the hierarchy of the Church, he is "on his way up."

But Caponsacchi is confronted by the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness. He has difficulty separating the trivial from the significant. He suffers inwardly because the institution of the Church has obliterated God and substituted law, authority, and tradition. These are all products

of society. He sees that one's movements must receive the sanction of society. And thus he must ask the question, "From whom does society receive its sanction?"

He comes to a position where he perceives that he has been motivated by little goals. Unwilling to give up worldly pleasures, he is accepted by the Church without stipulation. The Bishop tells him glibly that he need not renounce the world. "Nay, keep and give it us!/ Let us have you; and boast of what you bring." (VI, 309-10) Therefore he can continue being a "fribble and coxcomb" without breaking his vows. He rises in the Church, taking promotions rapidly. He is diligent at his post in the Maria della Pieve in Arezzo, and also keeps pace in upper-class society where "beauty and fashion rule." He is good at cards, knows the latest fashions, and also advises young gallants in their love affairs. It is in this kind of society of manners and decorum that he is accidentally confronted, one evening at the theatre, by the Madonna-like face of Pompilia.

The Bishop tells him that he will be an asset to the Church, and reminds him that his ability in "making madrigals" will be useful to the Church. It is true that Caponsacchi is something of an artist. But in making madrigals, as in imitating a priest, he senses that he is prostituting his talent. What really, he asks, is his duty to himself as a man? If he knows what his duty is, and yet does nothing, then he cannot do his duty to God or to his fellow

man. Instead, he develops "A polished presence, a genteel manner, wit/ At will, and tact at every pore." (VI, 371-72)

2

As an artist, Caponsacchi paints his own imaginative picture of Pompilia. After three or four years of being the fashionable young priest, he sees her at the theatre one night. She is "young, tall, beautiful, strange and sad." He sees her instantly with a double vision. She is both a living reality and a symbol. For him, she has tropological significance. Her face compels him to recall an earlier incident in his life. Sitting in church one day, as he "got yawningly through matin song," the porters brought in a painting by Raphael of the Madonna which almost transfixed him as he was confronted by it. Bored at the theatre, noting the usual faces, he has a similar reaction upon first seeing Pompilia. It is the expression on her face which blunts him. And later in his mind, her gaze endures "night and day." It is "burnt" into his brain, and the "beautiful sad strange smile" does not change. (VI, 435-37)

Slowly, creative impulses stir within Caponsacchi's artistic consciousness. His adoration of her is both real and symbolic. From this first meeting, he feels a deep religious reverence for this profoundly innocent girl, but he puts himself into a new role and is able to manipulate her as symbol. He associates her with images of light and

the heavens and the idea of heavenly inspiration. He once again refers to the picture of the Madonna in the church. (VI, 667-73) With subtle artistic control, he contrasts the light and the heavenly inspiration of Pompilia with the "black teasing lie" and the "black of the ambush-window" of Guido's night-time Arezzo world. (VI, 678-95)

But the black of the ambush-window is also the same window in which he frames his own picture of the Madonna, using the dark Arezzo world as a canvas:

> I made
> The one-turn more--and there at the window stood,
> Framed in its black square length, with lamp in hand,
> Pompilia. (VI, 701-04)

In recalling this scene, Caponsacchi sees it through the eyes of a painter. The window is the frame, Guido's dark world is the blackness of the canvas, and the lamp which Pompilia holds in her hand is a divine light which illuminates her face. This light is at the same time the painter's brush, and by means of it Caponsacchi is able to paint a picture in his mind because Pompilia at the window reminds him of an altar on which is shown Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows, one moonbeam penetrating her cell. He has seen this altar, yet he is creating a new Our Lady.

Caponsacchi is thus thinking on a level not directly involved in the realistic situation. He is a fashionable young dilettantish priest. He is also an artist, a maker of madrigals, a "painter." As an artist, he searches for his

own idea of the structure of a symbolic reality which will be different from the reality represented by the structure of institutionalized society. This latter is a reality which seems increasingly "unreal" to him, and corresponds to the "dream" world of Pompilia's life with Guido. As a result, among the many other feelings with which he responds to the presence of Pompilia in the window, is the feeling of artistic creativity. He later learns that Pompilia is an illiterate, simple-minded seventeen-year-old girl. Though she has great native intelligence, he could not possibly educe from her character the complex symbols he eventually employs in "framing" her in the window of his mind. Before he knew who or what she was, he experiences her "truth." But he is only able to do so because he is aware of the symbolic and even mythical possibilities which she represents to him.

When she stands framed within the window, in the midst of blackness, with the lamp in her hand, the complexity of the situation overwhelms Caponsacchi. The realistic events are frightening enough in themselves, since he knows that Guido may come springing out of the darkness at any moment. At the same time, there is something in her sad, strange smile, already impressed upon him at the theatre, that is a part of her. Her face suggests almost unendurable suffering. In fact, it suggests many things which belong to her as a person. This is part of Caponsacchi's "mundane passion." This tall, thin, lithe girl is a physical presence in front

of him. He senses in her the loneliness and despair which unite her with him in a common human bond.

But Caponsacchi, with his strong intellect, and his artistic consciousness, relates this human bond to his own vague notions of an imaginative reality. He associates her with the Raphael and then with Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows, both famous in the Madonna's legendary history. He must, in short, "re-order" and re-shape this experience if he is to act. Otherwise, Guido's night-time Arezzo world, and Caponsacchi's own function as social, fashionable priest in an institutionalized society, will pressure him into a conventional reaction, and he will do nothing.

Consequently, Caponsacchi emerges as the strongest illustration of what has been identified as Browning's pluralist world.[1] In such a world, where avenues to ultimate truth are frustrated, and conflicting beliefs and values prevail, man must realize the plastic nature of reality, must help mold, shape and change that very reality of which he is a part.

Just as Browning, by rounding out his "ring," helps to re-shape reality for the reader, so too does Caponsacchi help to re-shape the reality of his Arezzo world by painting his window-picture of Pompilia. It is only because Caponsacchi can view Pompilia symbolically that he is able to see the

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[1]See Chapter I, p. 2, above.

possibilities of a new kind of **reality.** These symbols are operative in the artistic consciousness of Caponsacchi. He is aware of some of their implications. In fact, he "worries" these symbols of light and darkness, of love and death, turning them over, feeling them out with his painter's brush, alternately calm and passionate. He calls the recognition scene between them "my miracle/ Self-authorized and self-explained." (VI, 920) It is his miracle because by manipulating the symbols in the window he sees the possibilities of imaginatively creating a new kind of reality. Within such a reality he himself may discover the purpose behind Pompilia's call for help. In his "painting" he first searches for the answers to the questions that have plagued him earlier: "What is my duty to my fellow-man? And what is my duty to God?"

3

Caponsacchi deliberately tries himself out in new roles, sometimes as the heroic St. George, sometimes as a maker of madrigals. It is part of his new reality.

But he is not the only one of Browning's characters who makes this attempt. In Fra Lippo Lippi, Lippo has the kind of vision, as J.L. Kendall has pointed out, that enables him to be an artist in life as well as an artist on canvas.[1]

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[1]J.L. Kendall, "Lippo's Vision," VNL, 18 (Fall, 1960), 18-21.

Lippo is claiming for himself potentialities which he believes are available to all human beings. "The world and life's too big," he argues, "to pass for a dream." His business, as with all of us, is "a laugh, a cry, the business of the world." He searches for new meanings, new levels of reality. He is tired of painting the old saints in their one-dimensional world. He derives his artistic inspiration from life and believes that "life in turn should be illuminated by the universal use of artistic imagination."[1] He relentlessly puts the old values to the test. "What would men have?" he asks, "What's it all about?" He is convinced that each of us has a hand in helping to shape the reality in which he lives. "God uses us," he explains, "to help each other so,/ Lending our minds out." To find the world's meaning, he adds, is his "meat and drink." The old laws, the old institutions, the old conventional modes of painting, are not much help to him. Instead, he will put himself down in a corner of the picture that he plans to paint of the Madonna. Out of this corner, he will come "As one by a dark stair into a great light." He is intruding into the midst of God, the "Madonna and her babe," and "Lillies and vestments and white faces," all pure of soul but lifeless, without the necessary meaning that makes up the world. Who enters the picture but Lippo? "I!--/ Mazed, motionless and moonstruck--I'm the man!" Lippo

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[1]Kendall, p. 20.

wants to inform this old legend--almost worn-out now and lifeless--with new meaning by using the constructs of his own imagination.

It is the "grey beginning" for Lippo, but Andrea del Sarto has lived in the placid twilight with his love, his life, his all, for years. The artistic inspiration that Lippo derived from life, and the molding of segments of reality which he brought to all lives by the use of the artistic imagination, are realized intellectually by Andrea. But Andrea feels a sense of loss because he cannot regard himself as creator rather than the thing created. It becomes apparent that his yearning for the patronization of greatness is a grasping for an external substitute for something lacking within. He recognizes, like Lippo, that one must paint the flesh, the fact, the beauty of the world. But Andrea necessarily sees beyond Lippo and knows that the painter must have something more than the ability to reproduce the world's lights and shades and lines on canvas. Lippo made the discovery that the artist's materials lay in the "gold" of worldly things. Andrea, because he strongly feels the lack of it, saw the need for the individual--artist or no--to supply that alloy of wax and honey which makes the gold workable.[1] He calls it the artist's soul. Although he is more aware of its significance than Lippo, he can really articulate it no better.

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[1]Ideas derived from personal communication with a colleague, Barton K. Johnson.

Pompilia has the same strivings toward creativity, and as we shall see, Pompilia makes her myth of a marriage in heaven a living reality. Yet Pompilia herself is no myth but a fact. She is human and Caponsacchi can believe in her. To him she is not a miracle. She only resembles the Madonna. She is a part of the capabilities of mankind. He reminds the judges that "I assuredly did bow, was blessed/ By the revelation of Pompilia." (VI, 1865-66) Caponsacchi sees in her one of the best things that human beings can achieve, and it is a quality, he tentatively thinks, that can be discovered in us all. In fact, he believes it is having its effect on the judges. "I am glad I helped you," he tells them. "She helped me just so." (VI, 1866)

But the Christian myth has been so corrupted that the forces of such people as Pompilia and Caponsacchi are only successful once in a while, because such forces will always be opposed by the overpowering strength of worlds similar to those of Rome and Arezzo. Caponsacchi and Pompilia attempt gropingly to formulate new laws. By means of their deep-seated imagination, through participation in the world of "pure crude fact," they relentlessly struggle with forces that tend to restrict and distort the plastic nature of reality.

4

Caponsacchi is pulled by the powerful feelings within

him. He cannot, at first, define them with any articulateness. Thought does him no good, because "no such faculty helped here." (VI, 944) After his dark encounter with Pompilia at the window he paces the streets of Arezzo. He cannot rationalize his experience by means of logic. The lessons he dutifully learned in his studies of Plato and Aquinas do him no good. He knows that he is passing "into another state, under new rule." (VI, 964-65) To explore the possibilities of this new state of existence he is compelled to think imaginatively and creatively.

Hence, for him, the daytime world of Arezzo which operates as the accepted norm, and is supported by organized institutions, can only be a hindrance to him in attempting to understand the new symbols which he has discovered in and through Pompilia. Nor is his own scholastic training of any help to him. He now has an "initiatory pang," which rises to an "ecstasy" that "outthrobs" the pain that accompanies it. (VI, 973) He has been married to the Church. But he now must break that union, in order to finish his painting of Pompilia and create a new union.

But Caponsacchi does not finish it. What he feels about this experience he cannot reason out. He cannot really articulate it. To the vulgar he is a "priest in love." And he himself cannot always distinguish between his passionate feelings for her as he gazes at her illuminated by the lamp while she stands in the window, and the face he "frames" in

his painting, the face of the young Madonna who suffers because of her love for humanity.

He indirectly comments on his confusion to the judges: painters would say that "Her brow had not the right line, leaned too much"; it was without the Greek profile proper for the portrayal of a martyr. He has, in a sense, made her in his painting to carry too much significance. The line of her brow "seemed bent somewhat with an invisible crown/ Of martyr and saint, not such as art approves." (VI, 1991-92) Her lips and eyes seem "careful for a whole world of sin and pain." As artist, he is aware of the physical defects in her profile because he is aware of her as a woman. He has been too easily influenced, he says truthfully but with an ironic implication, by the "trivial outside of her face/ And the purity that shone there." (VI, 1985-86) Thus, neither Thomistic inquiry nor conventional modes of painting will serve his purpose.

From another point of view, he does not seem aware that these realistic defects are the same ones which he has transferred to the canvas of his painting, that artistically he is not able to understand the difference between the mundane passion which he feels for this ignorant, innocent seventeen-year-old girl and the divine love which is reflected in her face as he frames her in the window of his painting. He does not completely understand the meaning of the symbols he has used in fashioning his new reality (a

reality which corresponds to Pompilia's new saint, new son, new century, at the beginning of a new year).

Besides, he tells the judges, he is "as good as **out** of it." (VI, 2075) In a sense, he says, he can only **play** "with an imagined life," a life of painting, of finishing his picture, which means for him, "To live, and see her learn, and learn by her," (VI, 2085) and from "such communion" to awake "To the old solitary nothingness." He does not yet realize that there will be, or could be, a vital connection between his playing with an imagined life and doing his duty as a priest. Instead he can, as Pompilia says dreamily, "wait God's instant men call years" and in the meantime "hold hard by truth and his great soul," and "Do out the duty" (VI, 1841-43) which he has discovered in the light of Pompilia's lamp, the duty embodied in his unfinished window-picture.

CHAPTER X

A MURDER BY MARRIAGE

1

The principle of love stands at the center of The Ring and the Book and it is in Pompilia's dialogue, in Book VII, that this principle is **solidly** established in the narrative of the poem. Browning makes it clear that the principle can only be understood by its operation in the facts of a temporal existence. Thus the reader is obligated to understand why Browning conceived this principle to be inexorably linked to the marriage and murder of Pompilia, why the blood of the victim is related to the slaughter of the lamb.

It is not simply that because of her marriage, Pompilia is murdered. Browning intended that the marriage itself be equated with murder; yet Pompilia's flowing blood, passing through the fire of Guido's furious stabbings, is converted into a bridge for her marriage in Heaven to Caponsacchi. Guido, the representative of the dark world of Arezzo, becomes the ironic instrument of Pompilia's transforming into a reality what she has felt as an instinct all along. She is raped and murdered, but by passing through

the pollution of Guido's evil destiny, she carries new life and new blood within her and begins building the bridge to Caponsacchi, her soldier-saint.

Pompilia is slowly, relentlessly murdered after she is married off to Guido by her foster parents. Of course, as she implies, one might say that each of us is dying all the time. But for her, the strong sense of being alive and functioning has been so large; for twelve years she was happy in her innocence and ignorance.

Pompilia is lying on her deathbed in the hospital at Rome, the victim of twenty-two knife wounds, telling her story to the attending nuns. She has already taken the last rites. Tonight, she knows, is her last one. Since the birth of her son two weeks before, she has liked life only indifferently well. Slowly murdered for the four years of her marriage, finding temporary purpose in her pregnancy and the birth of her son, discovering non-temporal purpose through her love for Caponsacchi, she now looks ahead to her death. She is not sure her marriage has not been a dream. Though individual scenes of the marriage break through the wall of her memory, their stark reality operates conversely and gives them an unreal grotesqueness. Isolated, they bulge outwardly, hurting her sensibilities, raping her mind, muddying the white patch of pure snow. (VII, 793) She is beautifully childlike. At seventeen, she can neither read nor write, but a purity suggesting the Holy M$_o$ther surrounds her. She names her son

Gaetano, after a recently canonized saint. The old saints are too busy, she says; they have too many to look after. Besides, she had five saints looking after her and it seemed to do her no good.

She tells the nuns she has developed a bad memory over the last four years. For this reason she can hang on to life for a while. Her memory is foggy; it helps dissipate the horror. Her age bothers her. When her son reaches her age and asks "'What was my mother like?'/ People may answer 'Like girls of seventeen'--" (VII, 67-8) She hopes people will say she looked old for her age, perhaps as much as twenty. Furthermore, the name Pompilia is not a common one, and possibly that will help her son to keep her apart from other girls her age.

Her childlikeness is balanced by her deeply maternal concern for her son's future. She knows the handicaps he faces. He will never know a father, because, Pompilia insists, no one fathered this child. He will have no family, no name, not even Pietro's nor Violante's, since they "must not be my parents any more." (VII, 99) So she names her son after a new saint, in order to "begin anew." The old saints are "Tired out by this time," (VII, 107) much like the world.

Her murder, she now perceives, has been a gradual affair. Up until recently she had not realized that other women led different lives because it was "step by step" that her life grew "so terrible and strange"; the evil seemed

to steal about "on tiptoe, as it were/ Into my neighbourhood and privacy." (VII, 119-20) When her rescuer finally came by torchlight he found her "familiarized with fear," lying next to the wolf, in the darkness of the wolf's lair.

Marriage fooled her in other ways too. "Everyone says," she begins, "that husbands love their wives,/ Guard them and guide them, give them happiness;/ 'Tis duty, law, pleasure, religion." Well, she says simply, "You see how much of this comes true in mine!" (VII, 152-55)

She relates what happened on the night of the triple-murder. She was sitting next to the fireside with her mother and father the day after New Year's, discussing her son's future: they heard a tap at the door. She thought at the time that it was perhaps the country woman, who had been caring for her child, coming with news of him. (VII, 60-5) For soon it would be the New Year, and there was a new child, a new innocence, a new saint, soon a new century, and it was time to begin anew. But it was not news of innocence at the door. Her father had been out sight-seeing and was telling them about a dramatic representation of the nativity that he had seen at a church that day. "There's the fold," Pietro said, referring to the people in the manger. To Pietro, everything in the play had seemed lifelike, the sheep all together and "big as cats." And such a shepherd, "half the size of life,/ Starts up and hears the angel--!" Pietro would have gone on but "at the door,/ a tap: we started up: you know the rest."

(VII, 265-66) Instead of an angel, a monster waited outside the door; instead of Christ, Satan, instead of divine goodness, a horrible, nameless, motiveless evil, the more grotesque because it seemed absolute, unending, forever.

When she was twelve her parents suddenly informed her she must marry a cavalier. One of her friends had told her cavaliers, when they weren't busy slaying monsters, devoured girls. But when she first saw Guido he did not look very devouring. He was old, not even as tall as she, "Hook-nosed and yellow in a bush of beard." (VII, 396) But even then he did not seem harmless. And she felt like something "strange or contraband" as she walked up the aisle of the Church of San Lorenzo. Her mother grasped her so tight she momentarily imagined that they had come to see a corpse. Waiting at the altar was an "unpleasant priest," Guido's brother Paul. The evil was there in the church. She felt it as the heavy church door locked out help behind them. The tapers shivered on the altar. Suddenly from behind the altar, instead of Christ, out popped the incredible Guido, "Hawk-nosed and yellowness and bush and all." (VII, 443) The fantastic replaced the real as evil enshrouded the church and its altar. Innocence stood before the shrine of Christ, her hand joined in marriage to the satanic world of night time by candlelight. The images of a nameless form of horror stack up in her memory as she struggles to tell her story, lying on her deathbed. She tells her listeners that the real

seemed to have become the unreal, "sheer dreaming and impossibility." The history of me, she says to the nuns, "is what someone dreamed." There, in the church, she discovered another side to the world, where the very values abhorred by her goodness were now presented to her as the norm. This is the way things are, her mother told her. Pompilia thought little, benumbed by it all, still trusting the behavior of adults. Now, four years later, the scenes revolve spinningly around her; her memory busily tries to blot them out.

3

Painfully she continues her story. At home, she relates, she heard them arguing, and rushed into the room. Pietro, red and angry, was shocked at what had been done. He had known nothing of Violante's plans for the marriage. "You have murdered us," he shouted at Violante. "Me and yourself and this child bride besides!" (VII, 492-93) It was here, she says, that she began to see the truth, that "Something had happened, low, mean, underhand,/ False, and my mother was to blame." She realized that she was "the chattel that caused the crime." Pietro insisted that Pompilia leave the room. He asked Violante: "Do you want the victim by/ While you discuss the value of her blood?" (VII, 525) She stood bewildered, an innocent, virginal, bloody sacrifice, entering a world turned inside out. Her murder was only beginning, the result of a marriage and the establishment of a system of values in

diametrical opposition to the feelings which hovered guardedly over her innocence.

Violante won over her husband by a specious argument. She attempted to restore the traditional, normative values of Rome in place of the "torchlight treachery" of Arezzo which Guido began to represent in Pompilia's eyes. He is titled nobility, she argued. Therefore Pompilia gets both a husband and a noble name, a family that is deeply rooted in time, solid, respectable, going back for generations; this along with a "palace and no end of pleasant things." (VII, 554) The Count was "the kind of man to keep the house," not young and unstable, but mature, wise and judicial. She has arranged for them all to live and die together in Arezzo, "a Tuscan town,/ Not so large as this noisy Rome." (VII, 566) Violante entreated her pardon, but Pompilia asked: "Pardon what?/ You know things, I am very ignorant." (VII, 571-72)

Ever since her marriage, Pompilia says, everything has been "one blank,/ Over and ended." She calls her marriage a "terrific dream." It was a dream because dreams never last, "daylight doses of plain life" soon return. Her marriage was simply the "note of evil: for good lasts." (VII, 595) Now, after the stabbing, she finds it difficult to follow Don Celestino's advice and forgive Guido, for she cannot possibly forgive a blank. She realizes Guido has his own justification because he was cheated into thinking she was bringing him wealth. "Marriage gave me, broke the compact so." She now

admits that in order to punish the parents Guido had a right to mistreat her. As his wife, she now sees that it was her duty to stand between Guido and her parents and blunt the edge of Guido's resentment. But one has to see in order to do this, and Pompilia tells us that she did not see at that point because "I was blind."

Further, she could not, after her marriage, consider the possibility of allowing Guido to sexually consummate their union: "I felt there was just one thing Guido claimed I had no right to give nor he to take," (VII, 721-22) because they were in estrangement, "soul from soul." At the time, she continues, she consulted patriarchal, traditional authority on her visit to the Archbishop, but he held her blameable. "'Twas in your covenant," he said, and she had been taught that he stood for God. But she knew that she had made no such covenant, that Guido married her for her money, that their souls "stand each from each."

Even at the time the Archbishop struck her wrong; his argument seemed staid and worn away by its constant repetition. The old laws in the Tuscan town of Arezzo were not the ones she felt. They seemed part of the Count's world by night. All the institutional machinery--the seats of authority and law and truth--collapsed in front of her. The wolf's body lying entwined in hers overpowered her senses. But it happened:

So, home I did go; so, the worst befell:
So, I had proof the Archbishop was just man,
And hardly that, and certainly no more.

In the world of Arezzo she found that the very qualities of life which corrupted her were offered to her as desirable goals. Her husband did consummate the marriage and the "last stay and comfort" within herself was forced from her. "Henceforth I looked to God/ Only," she says. "Henceforth I asked God counsel, not mankind." (VII, 859) Mankind had not then, nor has it now, the answers for her, because the world of mankind is not her world, but a "terrific dream." Only Caponsacchi, she says, has the "lustrous. . .soul" which perceives her.

Her child she gives outright to God, and "not to any parent in the world," in order that it will be safe. Her only other obligation before she dies is to clear the name of Caponsacchi. "The glory of his nature," she says, "Shot itself out in white light, blazed the truth/ Through every atom of his act with me." (VII, 922-23) She will remember once more for his sake the sorrow, because he still lives and is belied. Her love gives her the strength to continue.

4

Pompilia tells us how she first saw her soldier-saint:

I had been miserable three drear years
In that dread palace and lay passive now,
When I first learned there could be such a man.
(VII, 947-49)

She first saw Caponsacchi at a public play. Guido himself

lurked behind, anxious to find any excuse to rid himself of her. It was he who built a non-existent relationship up in her mind, declaring that the young priest had been haunting the street-corner and the side of the palace, "Publishing my shame and your impudence." He asked her:

> "You are a wanton,--I a dupe, you think?
> "O Christ, what hinders that I kill her quick?"
> Whereat he drew his sword and feigned a thrust.
> (VII, 1028-30)

The incredible murder continued as she was killed a little day by day. Through a twisted series of circumstances set up by Guido and her maid, Margherita, Pompilia was slowly but irrevocably drawn into the plot with the young priest. Each day her maid whispered his name into her ear, brought letters and urged her response. Not knowing the man, the name Caponsacchi itself became distorted: "That name had got to take a half-grotesque/ Half-ominous, wholly enigmatic sense." (VII, 1329-30) The inside-out values of the Count's world by candlelight continued to turn and twist around her. She had only seen Caponsacchi once, had never talked to him, but his name symbolized the manner in which the Arezzo world corrupted everything it touched. She identified his name with the rest of Guido's machinations.

She did not care what they did, for that matter. It no longer was of importance. Long ago she had tried to stop the sin by obtaining a divorce but the usual instruments of man's dark world, the age-old social institutions and estab-

lishments which controlled her life, had again refused. Another thought then became uppermost in her mind. Why not kill herself, since it did not matter, she had been murdered a dozen times anyway, her body raped, her soul polluted. But when she discovered that she was pregnant she knew that she could not take two lives at once. "Not to live, now, would be . . .wickedness," (VII, 1257) she thought. And thus, for the first time, she acted, joining forces with Caponsacchi. When she met him face to face, she says, and entreated him for help, he answered simply, "I am yours," the first words she ever heard him speak. (VII, 1447)

They escaped to Rome. Each day of his help gave her new strength. She lived, functioned, and fled now for the sake of her unborn child. She felt it as a command from Heaven to bring this child into life. She now knew that "Prayers move God; threats, and nothing else, move men!" (VII, 1624) And suddenly she was safe, away from that "Arezzo noise and trouble"; her baby was later born. Now, the evils she suffered no longer matter, "the end crowns all. The judges judged aright." (VII, 1648-49)

Thus, on her death-bed, she can pardon Guido because it is not with her that he must make amends but with God. In fact she thanks him. She has finally received her divorce:

> whereas strange fate
> Mockingly styled him husband and me wife,
> Himself this way at least pronounced divorce
> Blotted the marriage-bond: this blood of mine
> Flies forth exultingly.
>
> (VII, 1713-17)

She pardons him because he did not make himself. "His soul has never lain beside my soul." Whatever he touched seemed to be ruined. He infected everything with a plague. Yet he also saved her, she now realizes. "I am saved through him/ So as by fire." (VII, 1738-39) Her child is not Guido's child at all, "only his mother's, born of love not hate!" She will have her rights to her child in "after-time" even though it seems "absurd, impossible today." (VII, 1764-65)

She is near death, almost through with her story. Only one thing--and that the most important--remains. She must again speak of Caponsacchi, "the lover of my life, O soldier-saint,/ No work begun shall ever pause for death." What she sees she knows he sees that much more. She cannot find the "true word" that can convey what she means. "He is ordained to call and I to come!" (VII, 1814) He is a priest, she says, and cannot marry,

> which is right
> I think he would not marry if he could.
> Marriage on earth seems such a counterfeit,
> Mere imitation of the inimitable:
> In Heaven we have the real and true and sure.

On earth, she says, marriage-making is centered around "gold so much,--birth, power, repute so much, or beauty, youth so much." (VII, 1830-32) But in Heaven marriage is as the angels, because they "Know themselves into one, are found at length/ Married." (VII, 1834-35)

Thus Caponsacchi has not long to join her; he merely has to wait that "instant men call years." Through such souls

as Caponsacchi's, she concludes, God gives sufficient light in the Count's world of blackness "For us in the dark to rise by. And I rise." (VII, 1845)

5

By Pompilia's death, through a murder, the result of a marriage, Browning completes the circle of his ring by establishing the meaning, significance and operation in fact of the principle of love. For Pompilia and Caponsacchi, flying in the face of society's institutional ethic, there can be no marriage on earth, because in this world men can only be moved by threats, not by prayers or love. The darkness, the evil of the wolf in the lair, comes when the principle of love and its significance in marriage is lost and buried in the rigid, institutionalized establishments set up for the purposes of birth, power, gold and repute.

Browning surely must have drawn a brilliant analogy when he read over the old Roman murder case, slowly equating it with the gold ring of his wife. His task was to marry this ring and the old yellow Book, to see them unified into his poem, The Ring and the Book by means of the concept of love. The old yellow Book was without a unifying principle; the ring contained the principle but was by itself pointless, unbound to the dark world of the Book. Browning used the ring to inform the facts of the old Book, to join fact and fancy in writing a "book shall mean beyond the facts."

Pompilia is thus not only an all-embracing statement of love; she is also the bridge between marriage on earth and marriage in Heaven. She is the bloody sacrifice: her murder is her highest attainment; her death necessary in order to sustain the white patch of snow in the Count's world by night. She is both victor and victim, the receptacle for the evil directed against her, yet the giver and sustainer of goodness.

The murder was inevitable because it was the result of a conflict of mythical absolutes--Guido the absolute representative of a dark satanic world; Pompilia the eternal representative of the lightness of purity. Browning early equated murder with marriage in our minds. They could only by synonymous in an ethical system of "old saints, tired out by now," a world of old cliches mouthed not by God's representatives on earth, but by man's representatives in a sick-infested European society of darkness. In the Count's world by night, murder, like other inverted values, becomes a desirable norm. But Browning exposes the irony of Guido's double-edged knife when he demonstrates that out of an institutionalized, dark-corrupted marriage which brings murder, there emerges love and the possibility of a final marriage in Heaven. It also brings new hope in the form of Pompilia's son; it brings a re-examination and reassertion of God's intentions from the old Pope, and it suggests the possibility that a new working of an old law is possible on

earth, where the concept of love could be, if not a working principle, at least a goal to reach for, the object of our quest, signifying and enlarging the "pure, crude fact" of human existence.

CHAPTER XI

FOR US, THE LIVING

1

The creative dimensions of Pompilia's character extend backward and forward through The Ring and the Book. In her, in a figurative sense, Browning rests his case; her artistry is one of living: she grows to maturity, not in the dark world Guido has created for her, but in the new reality which she evolves with Caponsacchi. Her ordinary history is "what someone dreamed"; her implication is clear: she is beyond and apart from the real world; she considers it a dream world, not because she is escaping from life, but because she wants to live and cannot--not in the world as she has come to know it.

She is a beautifully ordinary girl; but she must reach beyond the world Guido has imposed upon her. In order to do this, she is obliged to fall back upon her own inner resources. Let it be known, she says, "That I had been the mother of a son/ Exactly two weeks." (VII, 13-14) As Guido destroys, she creates. Motherhood is only the beginning of her activities; it is her first "truth." The reason that she named her son "Gaetano," was so that he might represent a new saint with a

new way, a new dream, a new desire--"All these few things I know are true," she tells the nuns. "Will you remember them?/ Because time flies." (VII, 35-7) She does indeed know a "few things" and she finds her new truths on her own; none helped her except Caponsacchi. Dying in the presence of the nuns, she is still making discoveries, creating her own truths before their very eyes and hearts.

At seventeen she humorously feels old. But she means it; she <u>is</u> old. Through her experiences and her imaginative abilities she is able to transfigure objects she sees in paintings and sculpture and they become alive within herself. The statue of the Virgin that she used to pass by always "got my rose," because the babe that sat upon the Virgin's knee had an arm broken off; "you pitied her the more," Pompilia says. Like the Virgin, she creates a bond between herself and others by "bending down" with a rose, or a candle, or the soft touch of her fingers on Caponsacchi's forehead. The statue of the Virgin and the babe was broken off because of its "Thin white glazed clay," much, Pompilia begins to see, as humanity; and you pity humanity the more. (VII, 80-1)

She is envious of those people who know how to write; since she is illiterate, she must write her son's name in a different way. She wants to be set off from other girls her age so her son can remember her name. Since Pompilia is not a common name, it may help. But her striving for a niche in her son's memory is only the beginning; she wants a place in

what she hopes will be his new reality, which she believes she has helped create for him. She is convinced her lot is different "From any other woman's in the world." (VII, 116) "I looked up to the sky," she says, in telling of why she named her son Gaetano, "And took a new saint to begin anew." (VII, 102-03) Although her remarks about her age are touchingly appropriate for a girl of seventeen, nevertheless, behind lies the plain truth that she is growing; she is too old for this world. She knows too much about what it calls its "truths." Beginning with her child, she had put her own creative abilities into making up her world, and it is here, she sees, that the real truths lie.

The surface facts of her life place her in Guido's world; this part of her she hopes her son will ignore when he comes to know of her. Perhaps, she says hopefully, he will "get to disbelieve it at the last," because it is "sheer dreaming and impossibility." (VII, 109-10)

2

As a child she first began to relate her creative abilities to the ordinary reality she knew at the time. Her childhood world was no nightmare, but idyllic. But she realizes now that her tendencies to "half-create" what she sees were exercised by her then. "Since there hung a tapestry on the wall," she says, she and a neighbor friend named Tisbe began to hunt for each other in the scene that was depicted. Tisbe

was the figure with the half-moon on her hair, spear in hand, "Flying, but no wings." And Pompilia, Tisbe tells her, had green leaves growing out of the ends of her fingers, and all the rest of her looked brown and rough as if she were "turned a sort of tree." (VII, 349) Now, Pompilia explains to the nuns, "You know the figures never were ourselves/ Though we nicknamed them so." And, drawing the point of her analogy, she says, "Thus, all my life," have things been this way, regardless of whether they have been real, like the twenty-two daggar wounds in her, or not real, like the mythic scene in the tapestry; real or not, it all "looks old, fantastic and impossible." (VII, 186-200) It is because, she thinks, everything she touches is a "fairy thing that fades and fades" into unreality. (VII, 349) Even as child she could create for herself; she was able to exercise her consciousness in seeing herself in a role which symbolized another way of looking at human experience. Recollecting the tapestry scene now has a new significance for her; it seems more real to her than the daggar wound because it left out Guido's evil world.

But from such a contrast comes the confusion of "what was/ With what will be,--that late seems long ago." (VII, 210-11) She is not certain if even the truths she is so convinced of are not mere fancies. Even her son, she fears, "withdraws into a dream," like all the rest.

It was because things got started wrong from the beginning--from the moment when Violante paid a price for her from

her real mother, a dying prostitute. Pompilia believes that Violante did wrong when she swore in open court that Pompilia was her natural child. Pompilia believes that "God plants us where we grow" (VII, 301) and she grew up living a lie. The fault kept pricking away at Violante's heart, as if, even then, the first promissory notes to Guido had already been signed. Violante desired to make amends for her error and Pompilia perceives that "This brought about the marriage." (VII, 321) She conceives of herself as a wild-briar plucked by Violante to grow out of the "wild-beast's way"; yet the wild beast came any way because Violante "Fancied she saw God's very finger point/ Designate just the time for planting me." Violante regarded herself as God's agent, planting her adopted daughter "In soil where I could strike real root, and grow,/ And get to be the thing I called myself." (VII, 331-32) That is, Violante wanted to make it right with Pompilia. For after Pompilia had a husband, at least she would find that what "seemed" the truth would actually be the truth; she would, in other words, no longer have to worry about unreal parents because now she would have a real husband. And so everything would be "--All truth and no confusion any more." (VII, 337)

Now that she is a mother, she finds it easy to forgive Violante. Even while dying, she is for the first time no longer in pain. She sees "strangeness" rather than misery in that inverted world into which she grew up. It is all

over now and there is no more danger, "For past is past."

3

Thinking imaginatively and creatively, she draws numerous analogies. Referring to Caponsacchi as "my friend," she is reminded of their journey of flight, when on one occasion they are forced to stop at a hovel to get food. As they walk into this "hovel" dogs and cats begin to snarl at them. All life, Pompilia says, is like this hovel. And her reality is outside the hovel, outside life, outside time. Her marriage, she thinks, was like a debased coin, and she used it to purchase the praise of Violante and Pietro. She wanted to please them, even though she did not understand why she should marry. She hardly knew what a husband meant and supposed that "this or any man would serve." (VII, 411) Besides, being naive, she was better off. It was, she says, like the time the ugly, fierce-looking, scrawny-bearded doctor came to treat her when she was sick. One drop of a bitter, black stuff on her tongue and she was cured. Though the doctor was frightening and ugly, his medicine "beautified him." For all she knew at the time, why should not Guido's kind of medicine beautify him?

She can speak of her situation in an impersonal, detached way. There is nothing you can do, she says, in dealing with a man like Guido. "You stand/ Stupefied, profitless, as cow or sheep." (VII, 673-74) She is now objective

about it, even analytical. If you try to repair the first mistake with him, you merely "anger him just twice." This was because there was no way she could have known Guido's true motive, no way that she could have realized that he was deliberately trying to drive her into infidelity.

Guido's creations, she sees, are so different from hers--the letters he forges, the lies he tells her--as if his ability to exercise his mind and imagination had doubled back on itself. (VII, 690) She comes to understand that "in my ignorance I was just thwarting Guido's true intent." (VII, 695) It was outside her understanding of the way human beings think and live and believe to see that Guido wanted Caponsacchi and her together, wanted both of them "taken in a crime." (VII, 699)

If she made an error by behaving so unknowingly, it was because she was genuinely unknowing; the notion of an illicit affair with Caponsacchi was not something which occurred to her and which she dismissed. Being the person she was, the notion could not have occurred to her at any time. If she "fell into such fault" of being so ignorant of men's ways, she wisely suggests that Guido may, conversely, have overreached himself because of a "perversity of brain." (VII, 705) She sees what Guido never saw--that she and Caponsacchi were people of integrity. Guido, she points out, tried to "make me and my friend unself ourselves," (VII, 707) to be a different man and woman than what they were. Thus,

she reasons, Guido could never have succeeded. He could not create from materials (such as Pompilia and Caponsacchi) that were alien to his creatively destructive process.

And the final irony, as she sees it, is that, though Guido's "whole sad strange plot" met disaster, he actually succeeded in bringing them together, but for all the wrong reasons. This is why she is indebted to him, and for all the right reasons.

4

Pompilia is now clear on what happened and her own part in it. She made a major error; it was not really a fault since, under the circumstances, she could not be held accountable. Yet it was a mistake: she made the mistake of mistrusting her own organism. People in authority were the customary oracles for telling her what was right and what was wrong. And she had been trained to accept their judgments unquestioningly. There was nothing really different here; she was doing what other girls her age always did. When she went to the Archbishop for counsel in regard to Guido's insistence that their marriage be consummated, she was expecting at least a receptive audience. But the Archbishop declared she was "blameable" and "Nowise entitled to exemption there." (VII, 727) And she obeyed, she says, because "he stands for God." But now she sees that she was wrong in not trusting the deepest part of herself. And she knows that the

Archbishop gave the wrong advice: "Though he was thrice Archbishop" he would still be wrong. "Now I have got to die and see things clear," she says, realizing that she could not afford to follow what the deepest part of her knew was right in a world controlled by the Guidos and the Archbishops. Death only can enable her to follow the demands and the principles that she feels within herself. You either obey blindly and do their bidding and live in their world, or you see clearly and die.

The world she has helped to create for herself is not really possible in Arezzo--at least not for her. But she does have a world--one which she has helped slowly to fashion; she sees its possibilities even in the kind of life she is leaving behind; she hopes that her son--especially since he is a man--will be able to make the most of them. Caponsacchi, of course, will have to "Do out the duty" in present life before he can take full advantage of their new reality and their marriage in heaven.

She admits that Guido did not try to use deceit in consummating their marriage. He did not say it was because of their "souls' yearning" and that their souls should "mix in flesh." (VII, 775) In fact he argued the reverse: since their souls did stand "each from each. . ./ Give me the fleshy vesture I can reach." (VII, 781-83) At first she resisted him--the only reaction possible for her--but her "heart died out at the Archbishop's smile" as she remembered his refusal

to help her.

The difficulty was in the atmosphere; the world of Guido was all around her. Each place she turned she seemed to meet him or someone who stood for him--one of his dark representatives. There was the bland smile of the Archbishop and the leering innuendos of Guido's brother, Girolamo, who was trying to seduce her in her own house and with Guido's full consent. There were the shrugs of the Governor of Arezzo; when she stood in his chambers she suddenly heard "the cold cruel snicker close behind" and turning, she saw Guido, winking at the Governor, the situation well under control.

She sought help from a friar whom people called "The Roman," begging him to write her parents and make them aware of the situation, that even if they hated her, they would hate her as they do "gnats and fleas,/ Even the scorpions!" For this kind of hatred she would rejoice. But nothing happened. In the prison darkness of Guido's world, Rome and "The Roman" were no different from Guido; the friar was as helpless as she. She appealed to friends and relatives like Guillichini, but he could not go to Rome with her because "A flying gout/ Bids me deny my heart and mind my leg!" (VII, 1308) She tries Guido's cousin, fat jolly Canon Conti, who first threw the comfits into her lap, and who often protected her in Guido's presence by laughing at Guido's baleful countenance. But, he tells her, carrying her away to Rome is "above my

strength." He argues that Guido is too deadly. He "has claws that scratch, shows feline teeth." (VII, 1315) He is too formidable a foe and Conti would rather deal with a dog "twice the size." She cannot know if Conti is in league with Guido like some, or afraid of him, like others. For her, it makes no difference. He is irrevocably caught up in Guido's world and can hardly help himself. What leads her to suspect him, however, is that even he suggests Caponsacchi.

He reminds her that his brother-priest is much bolder and much braver than he. He's her "true Saint George," Conti tells her, "Though you drop eyes at mention of his name." (VII, 1329) It seems incredible to her that the world of darkness can continue to close in on her like a heavy fog, to envelop her brain, to engulf her senses. She had heard the name Caponsacchi so much, from so many different people, that it no longer stood for a person; it came to represent the very world she lived in; it symbolized the whole "terrific dream" of her life--"half-grotesque, half-ominous, wholly enigmatic," as she so brilliantly characterizes it. (VII, 1329-30) It is like what would happen to any by-word or broken bit of song which originally has a true meaning but which slowly undergoes transformation and corruption, changing as it passes from mouth to mouth, mixed with a "sneer or smile," until it soon comes to mean nothing but "ugliness" and "shame."

The idea of escape itself had come to seem like "distemper" and "dreaming" and the name "Caponsacchi"--not the man but the name--seemed to turn the whole idea "Into a mockery and disgrace." (VII, 1340) The evil was so built up around her that she could not work her way through it; it sidled up to her in half-measures at first; as she peeled off one layer there was always another; it was at times fleeting, puzzling, frightening, but growing, spreading, enveloping her, choking her off. It was hard to know how to fight it; it never seemed to come at her directly or at once. She did not even know how to recognize her foes and who or what they were.

It must be, she explains, that it was "step by step" that everything seemed "to grow so terrible and strange." (VII, 118) She grew up living a lie; the days and years passed; she married after heated arguments between Pietro and Violante; she was unthinking in her innocence and ignorance; and all the while the tortuous, winding atmosphere of evil "stole on tiptoe, as it were,/ Into my neighbourhood and privacy." (VII, 120-21) She could not tell when it was directly in her presence and when it was not. It "sat down where I sat, laid. . .where I lay," and then, after so many years, "I was found familiarized with fear." (VII, 122)

Seeking the sun (VII, 1003), what saves her is the torch held up by Caponsacchi in the dark cavern of Guido's world--the satanic figure both wolf-like and snake-like,

wound around her and in and out of her, slowly squeezing the life out of her (VII, 122-29) as he takes the "fleshy vesture" which he wants to "rend and leave just fit for hell to burn!" (VII, 784)

5

All along, her only defense has been within herself. But she doubts: she asks herself the question, Are things really as they say they are? Or are they as I feel and know they must be? Can she still be following the right road in the face of such negation? No, she argues, the world of dark caverns and torchlight cannot be real; that world has to be the nightmare, the "sheer dreaming," the "impossibility." The reality is the one she feels within herself, not only the knowledge of her pregnancy, but the trust in life which, rather than knowing empirically, she feels imaginatively.

But her trust in herself, her faith that her way is the right way, must be substantiated by more than just intuition or instinct. She is faced with the problem of how to do this, when everything around her seems to deny what she feels.

Caponsacchi is her grip on reality. With him she is able to continue to help create the "real" world, a reality which for her is the only one possible. She knows it is God's. She knows it exists. Despite Guido's efforts to clutch her in the dark caverns of his soul, to hide her from

the sun, she knows the light is there, illuminating what is real and true. She is never once completely fooled by any of them. Those men who "stand for God" she comes to distrust as much as she does Guido.

In March, after she first sees Caponsacchi at the play, Guido accuses her of a liason. Caponsacchi is always around, Guido lies, haunting street corners, waiting for his chance. But Pompilia thinks nothing of his accusations, since they are no more than his usual rantings. Nor does she care what he does. She longs for death and if it is to be by Guido's sword, so much the quicker. There is a thing worse than death, she tells him, and that is life. (VII, 1049-50)

Then Margherita, Pompilia's waiting-maid, takes up the chant begun by Guido, sounding the name that is soon to become so unreal to her. The people who speak the name "Caponsacchi" thus pervert it--Guido, whom she cannot even comprehend, and Margherita, who is, she knows, having an affair with Guido with little attempt at secrecy. And Margherita will not let the matter rest. Each day she pours more poison into Pompilia's ear. "Good cause for jealousy," she tells her, "cures jealous fools." (VII, 1058) Besides, Guido is already convinced that Caponsacchi is her intimate, so why not turn it into a reality? If she does nothing, the "priest will perish" and Pompilia will "grieve too late." (VII, 1083) And thus shall the "city-ladies' handsomest/ Frankest and liberalest gentleman/ Die for you." (VII, 1084-86)

But Pompilia is not swayed. She senses there is something wrong with Margherita's argument. For one thing, Margherita is Guido's mistress and she is probably acting under his orders. Even if Margherita is speaking the truth there is nothing they can do but trust in God. Pompilia's argument is more compelling than her maid's. She tells Margherita that people would become insane, "Seeing such evil with no human cure." (VII, 1100) Her argument is based on the nature of Guido's evil. Since she has already associated him with a satanic nether-world, it is obvious that at this point she believes that there is no human cure for Guido's evil because it is not a human evil, but a supernatural, satanic one. It would make no difference what they did. Being human beings, they cannot cope with what is not human. It is at this point that Pompilia is at her most passive and the nearest to suicide.

But Margherita will not let up. She begins to bring the forged letters written by Guido. As the situation grows more fearful, Pompilia on one occasion faints, and as she is coming to Margherita, "ever on my trace," whispers "Caponsacchi" in her ear. But all Margherita's efforts are in vain: "I listen while you speak,/--Assured that what you say is false." (VII, 1166-67) She brilliantly turns Margherita's methods back upon herself. "While you profess to show him me,/ I ever see his own face." (VII, 1185-86) It is the face she remembers seeing at the play, and each time

Margherita lies, Pompilia remembers the truth through the truth she saw in Caponsacchi's face. Thus she knows he could not have written the letters. And this is not instinct on her part. Deriving inspiration from the truth imbedded in his face, she creates that face within her own imagination.

She figuratively speaks of the problem of truth, since she has been talking about its intrinsic qualities. She tells the nuns that it seems strange to assume that what she has been telling them is the truth; she had not thought until now that it could be otherwise. All the things she has been telling them, she suddenly realizes, she has been telling them as though those things were all true. Maybe it might be considered "idle and inopportune." But how, she argues, could it be anything else but the truth? She points out that, even when she spoke to those people that were themselves untrue and could only take the truth "in through a lie," she still spoke the truth. Now, she concludes, she is speaking the truth to the "Truth's self"--that is, to the nuns through a death-bed confession--and this time there can be no doubt, because God "will lend credit" to her words, since they are God's agents and cannot corrupt the truth through lies.

6

On an April morning, in the fresh spring, right after Easter, Pompilia awakens with the absolute realization that

she is going to have a child. The vistas of her reality--always somewhat latent before--begin to open up before her. Her knowledge is like a broad yellow sun-beam that was "let fall/ From heaven to earth." She calls the sun-beam a draw-bridge which has been finally let down for her to begin to cross over. Through the rays of the sun dance flies and birds. "I too am to go away," she says as she steps out on the terrace. "I too have something I must care about." (VII, 1229) Just as the birds know their paths and their courses so well as they bring sticks to build their nests--**to this** particular window and no other--so now does she have "purpose and. . .motive too,/ My march to Rome, like any bird or fly!" (VII, 1245-46)

"Tell Caponsacchi he may come!" she orders Margherita. And that evening as she steps out on the terrace she feels the bond that unites them, that isolates them from all the people she has met in Arezzo. There stands Caponsacchi, with the "same silent and solemn face" that she first saw in March at the theatre. She is relieved that it is the same face that she has imaginatively kept alive in her memory. She sees now that she wasted his strength at the theatre but here he is "still at watch/ To save me yet a second time." And with "no change/ . . .though all else changed in the **changing** world!" (VII, 1415) The fact that he has not changed in the midst of the "Arezzo noise and trouble" confirms her belief in him. She knows what he knows: that there is a hard core

at the center of them that will never change.

She tries to explain why she struck back at Guido when he caught up with them during their escape. She had been passive for years, but now, with Caponsacchi helpless in the hands of Guido's henchmen, she says, "I did for once see right, do right." (VII, 1591) She no longer feels that she cannot fight Guido's kind of evil. One must, she says, finally turn and take action if he would have his wrong "observed by God."

Now that she has moved from a passive to an active state, now that she is fleeing, escaping, asserting herself, she sees that her former passivity was not as "right" as her actions now. But now she has purpose and motive; she feels the importance of acting, of moving, of taking a stand. She strikes back at Guido, she says, because "Prayers move God; threats, and nothing else, move men!" (VII, 1624) She realizes that she used to pray to men like the Governor and the Archbishop as though they were God, and she should have threatened them instead; she was praying to the wrong people. She rips Guido's armor off with the swipe of her sword, but it was truth that saved her, she maintains, and "not the vain sword nor weak speech." (VII, 1641)

She now sees that the judges were right in her trial in May; they sent her to a convent which enabled her to get away from Guido and Arezzo while in her pregnancy. In the convent she found peace; there she begins to consider what

has happened to her and what it means. She wants to "understand somewhat of my past" and "Know life a little." (VII, 1666) But she has her gain, has "enjoyed/ As well as suffered" in her life, and more importantly, Caponsacchi has helped to give her a "foretaste. . ./ Of better life beginning where this ends." (VII, 1669-70) Her reality, she knows, is still being created and will continue to be so in her "heaven."

Her reality includes forgiveness, but whether or not she forgives Guido is irrelevant; she will pardon him. "I give him for his good the life he takes." (VII, 1710) But more importantly, she is grateful to him for murdering her. She is, ironically, in his debt.

7

In mid-twentieth century parlance, Guido gets his divorce "Italian style." And Pompilia is sharply aware of this. Only by murder can he rid himself of his marriage contract. And only by being murdered can Pompilia be entirely free of him. This way, Pompilia says, by murdering her, Guido "at least pronounced divorce." The blood coming from her twenty-two knife wounds "flies forth exultingly." The red blood washes her white, and it gives thanks for the blow.

She believes there is still hope for Guido, even though for her own part she knows that "We shall not meet in this world nor the next"; but she believes that Guido can be

touched by God's shadow.

Pompilia is deeply aware that her own personality was ideally suited for bringing out the worst in Guido. There was "Nothing about me but drew somehow down/ His hate upon me." (VII, 1725-26) In fact, it is for this reason that Guido can be "somewhat. . .excused" because Pompilia sees that "hate was thus the truth of him"--that Guido found truth in hatred, just as Pompilia knows that the real truth for her--one that she has, on the one hand discovered, and on the other hand, helped create--is love. "I am saved through him/ So as by fire." (VII, 1739) She emerges from the fire of his hatred, and the twisted truths therein; he saved her by murdering her; otherwise, her polluted soul and body would still be craving a disinfectant for the plague she contacted from him.

Her own truths are complete. She cannot articulate them but this is of no importance. "Why should I doubt He will explain in time/ What I feel now, but fail to find the words?" (VII, 1760-61) She shall have her "rights" in "after-time." When she thinks of these truths, they seem "absurd, impossible today," but they are part of all those things which are "not explained" but simply "known." But, as she realizes she is very close to death, she saves her last breath to describe to the nuns the most important truth of all.

8

Death does not end the work, she says to the nuns, but she is really addressing Caponsacchi. If she were alone, she tells him, it would all be a failure. But she knows he is there with her. "O lover of my life, O soldier-saint," she cries, "Love will be helpful to me more and more/ I' the coming course, the new path I must tread." (VII, 1788-89)

For the first time, we see how completely love is at the base of her world, that her world is beginning to take shape, that she and Caponsacchi have helped to define its boundaries; it is a world made possible only by their own creative efforts; it is, she knows, a different kind of insight from the world of Rome and Arezzo. "Tell him that if I seem without him now,/ That's the world's insight." (VII, 1791-92)

He symbolizes for her love at any and every level. From their action, she maintains, "no touch/ Of harm came." She knows that it was "all good, all happiness,/ Not one fleck of failure!" (VII, 1803-04) When she opened the door that fateful night she thought it was Caponsacchi, with all his "great heart" and "strong hand." She would have sprung to these, even if they had been "beckoning across/ Murder and hell gigantic." (VII, 1811-12)

She will not be excluded from her heaven. She will not be denied the life she and Caponsacchi have worked so

hard for. It is a world apart from Guido; it is the world of God's light, of God's love, of a universal sympathy, bending down "For us i' the dark to rise by."

"And," she says, "I rise." (VII, 1844-45)

CHAPTER XII

ARCANGELI'S FACE FOR THE WORLD TO SEE

1

Arcangeli's deepest regret is that "Guido was foolish enough to confess."[1] He is grateful, however, that he has a nobleman to defend, in a case that is being discussed all over Rome. Further, added excitement is caused by the thousands of people coming into Rome because of the Festival, during which time the case will be heard.

Arcangeli speaks and thinks in superficial terms. Park Honan[2] points out the three types of sentences which Arcangeli uses: short and exclamatory; short, but with alternating Latin and English phrases; and "incremental" sentences. The short, exclamatory sentence ("Why, work with a will, then! Wherefore lazy now?" [VIII, 60]) expresses Arcangeli's generally high spirits. The Latin-English phrases are those the lawyer uses when he is in the midst of

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[1]R. T. Flewelling, "The Ring and the Book: A Study of Sophism," Personalist, 2 (October, 1921), p. 220.

[2]Browning's Characters, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 276-77.

composing his defense for the trial. The incremental sentences are those "in which clauses and phrases often have an interlocking connection with one another, the object of one clause becoming the subject of the next." As Honan points out, the particular kinds of syntax which Arcangeli employs are "psychologically revealing." On occasion, the lawyer--hard at work--plods through his arguments. The phrases are dull but in sequence (VIII, 1106-1446). He lapses into "long, additive sentences with interlocking parts," when he is not hard at work, but thinking of getting home to the birthday celebration of his son Giacinto, and of the treasure box of the miserly grandfather. (VIII, 23-36)

These sentences expose Arcangeli: "Erupting in exclamations, plodding wearily through sequences of short phrases," Arcangeli's mind wanders and he allows himself to indulge in the interlocking, associative qualities of the cumulative sentence, as one image (his son's birthday party) leads to another (his buxom wife hovering over the grandfather) and this to another (the grandfather's wealth and stinginess), and yet others (the grandfather's treasure-box, the parchment or will within it, what provisions for his young son are in the will or should be); finally his meanderings lead to a conclusion, namely that he must "prime the old man with his best Orvieto" wine.[1] Arcangeli is of relatively

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[1]Honan, P. 278.

shallow mind, a civil servant who is lazy, whose mind "explodes, plods, or wanders," but who cannot think with complexity, vigor or imagination. Homan notes that in a monologue of 1805 lines, Arcangeli's lack of complexity and depth is indicated by the sparseness of his syntactical patterns. The Pope's monologue contrasts effectively with Arcangeli's since the Pope demonstrates all the qualities of intellectual depth that Arcangeli lacks.[1]

Had Guido not confessed, Arcangeli was already prepared with an elaborate system of innuendoes to show that Caponsacchi was the real murderer. Since this cannot be done, he "goes over the points one by one, how he shall impress the Pope with his knowledge of St. Gregory, St. Jerome, and St. Bernard, all of whom say that a man must defend his honor."[2] He will try to anticipate Bottini's argument that there was too much delay between the cause and the crime by pointing out that there was no actual interval, since Guido used his first real opportunity. The fact that Guido delayed even further after he reached Rome can be explained, thinks Arcangeli, by the religious sentiments which were aroused in Guido by the then-current Feast of the Nativity. (VIII, 1075)

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[1]E.D.H. Johnson, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 128.

[2]Flewelling, p. 220.

2

It is helpful to think of Browning and the Pope as being analogous in the way in which they view the murder trial. Figuratively, Browning is the real lawyer at the trial, not Arcangeli. Browning supplies the imaginative and psychological insight which Arcangeli needs but does not have. In like manner, the Pope has some of this insight, which E.D.H. Johnson refers to as "intuitive,"[1] but which I prefer to call "imaginative" or "mythic"; this insight has love at its base. The Pope is looking for meanings in a corrupt society and he is certain he has found them in Pompilia. Johnson says the Pope's discovery comes about because of the "naked simplicity" of Pompilia's feelings, because of her "yielding to the promptings of primitive instinct." Here, Johnson states, the Pope perceives "the operation of a moral sense about which civilized society knows nothing."[2]

But surely this is not precisely what Browning had in mind. One gets the idea that Johnson is speaking of the concept of the noble savage, of a return to some pristine state in nature or man, where man's instincts are irrefutably right. Browning, more than most, would recognize the folly of this position.

Browning can only point up through the function of

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[1]Johnson, The Alien Vision, p. 128.

[2]Ibid.

the character of Arcangeli the sort of society and institutions he is indicting, and through Caponsacchi and Pompilia the sort of values needed for a new kind of society. There are not too many words available to him because the words--just as the objects they represent--have also been corrupted. The values the poet is seeking are not "uncivilized." Arcangeli's values are shallow, limited in application, non-intellectual, non-conceptual, unimaginative; in like manner, the institution of government which Arcangeli represents contains the same characteristics; but on this higher level such values become powerful, cruel, impersonal, meaningless, and at all times operational and far-reaching, so that they affect the lives of each citizen in Rome, Arezzo, and Italy generally.

Arcangeli is--in an ironical sense--a normative figure in the poem because he is the most characteristic of the professional class in Rome at the time of the murder. Conversely, Guido is not a normative figure. Flewelling, in dividing the characters in The Ring and the Book into three classes, puts Arcangeli, Bottini, and the Pope into "the Officially Interested Group"; Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome and Tertium Quid into the "Generally Interested Group"; and Guido, Caponsacchi and Pompilia into the "Specifically Interested Group."[1] However, Arcangeli's function is generally similar to that of Half-Rome, Other Half-Rome and Tertium Quid. All of these

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[1]Flewelling, pp. 215-23.

characters reflect similar tendencies towards having reality engendered upon them, rather than helping to shape the reality in which they live. All are materialistically oriented, self-indulgent and reflect certain kinds of insecurity. Each, however, reflects some traits peculiar to his own class and background.

Arcangeli, for example, as a professional man and a civil servant, reflects those qualities of Roman jurisprudence which are normative in Roman society but which are impugned in the poem, by both the poet in the poem (I, 824-29), and the Pope, and finally, with self-righteous indignation, by Guido himself. Arcangeli is occasionally vicious, occasionally stupid. And his personality is carefully delineated in order to separate what Honan calls the "domesticated sensuality" of his family life from the "routine and unimaginative professionalism" of his position as a lawyer.[1] These two sides of his character only meet psychologically within him. None of his audience at the trial is aware of his being any other than a powerful lawyer in the courts.

3

Arcangeli does not really understand the implications of the murder case, nor does he think of Pompilia with the objectivity and insight which the Pope and Caponsacchi demonstrate respectively. Often during the trial, in his

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[1]Honan, p. 152.

maunderings, he thinks of food. The animal images used by other characters in the poem to describe Pompilia--"lamb, rabbit, fish, and pigeon"--are the same images Arcangeli uses when he thinks of getting home to dinner that evening. Honan, in pointing this out, asserts that it is because Arcangeli views the world in general--"people, the law, Pompilia"--as important "only as they are able to contribute to his own well-being and bodily satisfaction."[1] Truth and justice are means to the realization of Arcangeli's own system of values--a system based on sensual pleasure, good food, a rich table: "What in the world," he asks, "should a wise man require beyond?" (VIII, 1778-79)[2]

For Arcangeli, Guido is not the villain, nor Pompilia the heroine. With his dim vision, he sees Guido as an insect or bee or elephant. Pompilia is a fox or an owl. Arcangeli is unable to "induce" the truth from the facts of the case, since truth does not reflect his personal philosophy. For him, the villain in the case is his legal opponent, Bottini, whom he pictures as "a dog, a beast, a ferrett, and . . .as an ass."[3] Honan sharply demonstrates that Arcangeli's use of animal imagery reveals an "underlying self-satisfaction, as well as voluptuousness. . . .and mental laziness."[4] He is a deadening mediocrity who, because of his position, can

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[1]Ibid., p. 184. [2]Cited in Honan, p. 184.

[3]Honan, p. 184. [4]Ibid.

inflict much damage on others in the name of justice. In actuality, he shows a "total blindness to people and to issues that lie beyond the mechanics of his profession on the one hand and his family circle on the other."[1]

Even when talking of something else Arcangeli often uses images or terms connected with food. His son, he says, will soon be "trying his milk-teeth on some crusty case." (VIII, 12) As the trial wears on he thinks, "I cannot stay much longer stewing here" and has to catch himself when he adds, "Our stomach. . .I mean, our soul--is stirred within." (VIII, 1385) Gluttony actually "informs and to some extent dictates the nature of all his thoughts and actions."[2] With such a view of experience, the truth that might be deduced from the murder case is irrelevant to Arcangeli, since, in his view, it neither "feeds nor sustains" him. As a result, he is not interested in even the possibility of Pompilia's innocence or Guido's guilt. Guilt and innocence are not related to the richness and variety of his table, his sense of well-being, the Roman society that he knows, nor the courts he practices in. But these are the values that make up his rationale for existence and which he sees as being operational in the world in which he lives.

Besides his preoccupation with food, Arcangeli is also fond of Latin phrases. According to Honan, approximately one verse in five in Arcangeli's monologue contains some Latin,

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[1]Ibid., p. 185. [2]Ibid., p. 200.

and sixty-one verses are altogether Latin. It was not Browning's intention to use the Latin phrase merely to give the monologue a more realistic atmosphere. Actually, Arcangeli's peculiar use of Latin again exposes certain facets of his character. His "legal language represents the outward-facing professional side of his make-up." This is the only part of Arcangeli that the court sees. Browning's intent is next to "reveal the human being behind the formal front." Arcangeli demonstrates his attitude toward his own professional nature in the first Latin used in the poem when he thinks of his son Giacinto engaged in the amare conjugation. (VIII, 4-8) Here, the familiarity with which he mixes Latin and English reveals Arcangeli's "light-hearted, casually detached. . .partly comic view" of the professional side of his life.[1] When he finally gets down to work at the trial we hear more Latin as Arcangeli laboriously submits his brief: "P-r-o Pro Guidone et Sociis," he slowly writes, spelling the first word out. "Count Guido married--or, in Latin due,/ What? Duxit in uxorem?--commonplace!" (VIII, 128-29)[2] The usual Latin phrases do not satisfy Arcangeli. Despite his experience with Latin, the phrases do not flow, "for he is striving to build a careful image of himself as he goes along."[3]

It is in areas such as this that Arcangeli is intent

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[1]Ibid., p. 222. [2]Cited in Honan, p. 223.

[3]Honan, p. 223.

upon applying his artistry. He wants to select the correct Latin phrases, but only to insure that he is presenting the best image of himself to the Court, and not for any good that it might do Guido. Similarly, to satisfy his sensual cravings, he can imaginatively conceive of the luxurious table that awaits him at home once the day's work is done. His creative abilities are thus largely distracted from doing their real work. Instead of applying them to the case at hand, he is unable within himself to separate his work from his pleasure.

As a result, without exercising properly what artistic abilities he has, Arcangeli indulges in pompous, inflated Latin phrases. He is more concerned with the professional mask that he will present to the public than he is in developing any sense of integrity with himself. And one should not overlook the fact that Arcangeli has the ability, just as all people do. His use of metaphors in comparing the case to different foods, his comparisons of animals (killed and stuffed for the table) to the principals in the case, demonstrate clearly this ability. When he expresses his obvious and deeply selfish love for his eight-year-old son Giacinto, it is with the sensual imagery of food and wine. As he attempts to construct the proper Latin phrases for the case, it only serves to remind him that Giacinto has reached a particular verb conjugation in school and, his mind working by association, this reminds Arcangeli of his son's birthday party that evening. In each case, Arcangeli moves from one

idea to the next, applying his creative abilities to each scene as he calls it up in his mind. He does not attempt to exercise any artistic control over these images; he moves without much discrimination from one to the next; the only control he demonstrates is when he is ploddingly but carefully constructing the proper mask of the powerful professional lawyer of the Roman courts.

Slowly, as the day wears on, we see the "actual process of a character's constructing a social face" for himself. The "simplicities are rejected" and "fantastic figures of speech are seized up." Human beings like Pompilia and Guido are "jammed into stock roles." By the end of the monologue Arcangeli is larger and more complete and his Latin "represents the final, pieced-together, polished, comically grandiloquent Arcangeli that the world is to see."[1]

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[1]Ibid., p. 224.

CHAPTER XIII

ARCANGELI'S DEFENSE: THE IRRELEVANCE OF GUILT

1

Arcangeli's defense of Guido is inevitably bound up in Arcangeli's own personal philosophy. Two questions are important in understanding the arguments for the defense at the murder trial: (1) Within the context of the poem, what sort of values are reflected in Arcangeli's attitude and how are they related to the social and political institutions which he represents, and to the society of which he is a part? (2) What is the poet's intention in representing Arcangeli as a sensuous, irresponsible, purblind mediocrity?

We have long had fairly good evidence, based on John M. Gest's study of the actual murder trial, that the lawyers for both sides were not only competent, but felt rather strongly about the ethical values underlying their profession.[1] Although it is perhaps impossible to identify Browning's intention with any preciseness, particularly since he main-

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[1]The Old Yellow Book, Source of Browning's "The Ring and the Book," (Boston: Chipman Law Publishing Co., 1925), pp. 600-25. See also, William C. DeVane, A Browning Handbook (rev. ed.; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1955), p. 341.

tained, as he grew older, that he had remained true to the facts of his source material, the poet's intention may nevertheless be "induced" from the facts of The Ring and the Book just as Browning induced the truth from the facts of The Old Yellow Book.

Arcangeli's ostensible defense for Guido is simply that Guido murdered Pompilia and the Comparini in order to defend his honor; that Guido's concept of honor, which lay at the base of his entire view of life, could not possibly allow either deceit or adultery. "Honoris causa," Arcangeli says, "so we make our stand." (VIII, 424)

It is here that Arcangeli needs to exercise his creative abilities with as much intensity as he can manage. If he is going to make a case for Guido at all, he must do it by dazzling the judges with the metaphorical possibilities of the concept of honoris causa. He indeed does make the attempt, but he simply cannot stick to the case. At times, when he is going well, some word or image will remind him again of his son, his home, the food that awaits him, or the mask he wants to present to the Court, and his artistic abilities are dissipated on these interests rather than on the case at hand--on the concept of honoris causa which he has chosen as his defense.

Arcangeli wants to invest this concept with as much importance as possible. "Honour is a gift of God to man," he blandly states. It is "precious beyond compare." (VIII,

458-59) Thus, had not Guido murdered, the implication is that he would have been disobeying God's dictum, Arcangeli places Guido in a position somewhat analogous to Hamlet as he listens to his father's ghost. But Arcangeli's argument is largely counterfeit since it is based on the false assumption that such a concept of honor as he will base his defense of Guido is actually operative in Roman society. Arcangeli does not distinguish between a code of honor which might possibly have been embodied in the original idealistic values of a noble class, and the superficial, face-saving, largely corrupted code of honor operative in the Roman society of the late seventeenth century. Certainly the original code of honor would not have sanctioned murder. Arcangeli glibly blurs this distinction. Although Arcangeli's concealment is no doubt deliberate here, nevertheless the confusion he succeeds in establishing only rebounds to work against him, because he has not taken the trouble to think imaginatively and creatively about the concept of honor, and its historical and ethical antecedents.

For one thing, such thinking is not really indicative of Arcangeli's world-view. Honoris causa is simply another Latin phrase. Arcangeli is familiar with the legal precedents connected with it. He cites some of them; one he cannot remember, and in his nonchalance it is clear that the Latin phrase represents a legal defense and has no ethical meaning for him. It is a pragmatic means to a pragmatic end.

In reality, Arcangeli's defense of Guido is an inadvertent apology for his own life. Arcangeli is trying to get Bottini to meet him on his own grounds. Essentially he is asking: "Is Guido's guilt or innocence relevant here?" Bottini refuses these terms, not because he believes that justice must triumph, but because he believes that everybody is hopelessly corrupt and guilty, and as Fisc he has a professional and mechanical obligation to strive for a conviction. Arcangeli and Bottini are caught up in the inverted values of their profession and their world. Arcangeli does not want to use his creative abilities in an attempt to understand where his argument breaks down (just as the Roman society does not want to know where the moral fabric of its institutions breaks down). If Arcangeli admits even to himself that Guido's guilt or Pompilia's innocence is relevant then he must question all the basic motives and values of his own way of life. Thus Arcangeli psychologically cannot afford to apply his artistic abilities where he needs them. He cannot make such an investigation, since he in some way must sense that the inverted values that he lives by would then break down, his social position would be threatened, his justification for existence undermined. In short, he would see that then Caponsacchi and Pompilia were right and that he is wrong.

What then characterizes Arcangeli? Is it not the fact that he is amoral, both artistically and ethically?

And is this not consistent with the level and kind of society in which he lives? Not only Arcangeli, but all of Roman society has deliberately placed itself outside the sphere where moral inferences and judgments apply. Arcangeli is not interested in even realistic and legitimate philosophical speculation about the case. He wants to shore up the walls of his own personal empire, and in this area he is not lazy but industrious. He wants to protect what he has, to do better what he is already doing, to get more of what he has already got. He has a pleasant home, a buxom wife, a wealthy and aging father-in-law, a son in whom he is well-pleased, a rich table, an envious social position and a bland complacency. These all go if he suddenly develops an imaginative sense of right action. No, one decides these matters in each specific case. One identifies the area, draws boundaries, and does not let any issue in that is not relevant.

And guilt, for Arcangeli, is not relevant.

2

But why, poetically, is Arcangeli presented in this way rather than in another? One must be careful to avoid the "intentional fallacy," but within the terms of the poem the reader can see clearly that just as Arcangeli helps round out the ring, so too does he help round out the philosophical framework of the poem. As E.D.H. Johnson has demonstrated, the world in which this poem lives and breathes is a pluralistic world. It is a world of "maybe," as William

James would say. It is an indeterminate world and no one point of view, no one person, no one system, has access to the ultimate truth. Pompilia, Caponsacchi and the Pope rise above these limitations by helping to mold the reality of the world in which they live. But the other characters in The Ring and the Book help to "compound the indeterminancy of this pluralistic world,"[1] by exercising their creative abilities without any accompanying instinct toward right action. In Arcangeli's case, Browning is able to show what happens when one does not attempt to cope with an indeterminate world but allows it to control one's own destiny. Arcangeli does not want to sense the plastic nature of reality, which James insisted upon.

As a result, although Browning accepts a pluralist universe, he is able to demonstrate the limits and dangers of this attitude when it has no orientation, by turning it over and examining it from different points of view. (Such an examination is inevitable, since it is itself pluralistic in origin and method.) Involved in pluralism is the precarious but necessary principle of "suspension of judgment." Browning himself was often able to employ this principle successfully, both in his art and his life. However, the application of this principle can also be unsuccessful, even calamitous. It accounts, in part, for what Johnson in another context

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[1]"Robert Browning's Pluralistic Universe: A Reading of The Ring and the Book," TQ, 31 (October, 1961), p. 38.

referred to as the "curious ambivalence" of so much of Browning's poetry.[1] It also explains why Browning was admired in his own time but "for all the wrong reasons." Suspension of judgment inevitably involves a kind of Janus-faced urbanity, inevitable compromise, and a confusion among intellectual, artistic, and social principles. As Johnson puts it, "The mask had, after all, got mistaken for the face."[2]

In the character of Arcangeli, Browning can demonstrate what happens when a man suspends his judgment to such a degree that he no longer has the capacity to make judgments. In a like manner, the mask that Tertium Quid assumes in order to ingratiate himself into the favor of his social superiors becomes his face, and he ends up displaying the "born skeptic's inability to make a choice."[3] Thus the character of Arcangeli serves to reveal the underside of the very point of view which is poetically asserted in the poem. And, in Arcangeli's case, the dangers are evident. Arcangeli is smug, sensuous, and complacent. He is unable to see beyond himself; he creates his own little reality with his son at the center. The external world he accepts as a "given." He regards it merely as an extension of his own values. If the world is indeterminate, if points of view are constantly in conflict, then one can only obey the dictates of fashion

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[1]The Alien Vision, p. 217. [2]Ibid., p. 218.

[3]Johnson, "Robert Browning's Pluralistic Universe," p. 24.

and accept what is given with all its amoral implications. What should a wise man require besides? he asks ingenuously.

Yet Arcangeli is not unaware of the role he is playing in court. He knows that here he is on the "world's stage"; that he must "play the man in public, vigilant for law,/ Zealous for truth, a credit to his kind." (VIII, 1769-70) He feels no moral compunctions about such behavior. He accepts all of his roles with equanimity. They are part of his "given" world, with all its spiralling, elusive, paradoxical, inverted values. Caponsacchi, too, accepts the same kind of world, because these are the facts as any man who is not a fool knows them. But unlike Arcangeli, Caponsacchi does not believe that these facts are intractable. He believes that the facts of existence are viable, that by imaginative reconstruction he can help shape the very reality in which he lives.

Caponsacchi reaches a level of insight which Arcangeli will never attain. Caponsacchi recognizes duties beyond himself, beyond his social circle, and by means of a new language is able to partially realize his obligation--his duty to himself, to his fellow man, and to God. Pompilia provides Caponsacchi with a sense of direction and purpose. But Arcangeli derives no inspiration from the example of Pompilia which is right in front of him. He has values, but they seem curiously in limbo, unrelated and hanging in a moral void. Such considerations as Caponsacchi enters into would seem

irrelevant to Arcangeli. They would be "not to the business."

Arcangeli thus helps to round out the multi-faceted, revolving, alternately dark and dazzling components of Browning's pluralistic world. Because of this pluralism Arcangeli's reality turns inwardly upon himself. He separates the world's business from his own personal pleasures. His goal, which is even more firmly established later when we meet him again in the last book of the poem, is to "strain every nerve" (XII, 359) in behalf of his son. His love for his son is not extended outside his little reality. He does not see its necessary relationship to the ethic of the institutional machinery which he represents professionally. He does not see that the paternal instinct he so obviously has for his son is similar to the deep maternal instinct Pompilia feels for Gaetano.

Had he applied his imaginative abilities to these kinds of relationships, Pompilia's "truth" could have been as evident to him as it apparently was to the judges. When Caponsacchi maintained that he wanted to show Pompilia's truth not for his own sake, but for the sake of the judges, he presumably would want to show it also for Arcangeli's sake and for the sake of all suffering humanity.

Arcangeli's concern is far removed from this, however. His most immediate problem is winning his contest with the real villain of the case.

"Bottini," he cries in a momentary feeling of triumph, "burn your books, you blazing ass!" (VIII, 1804)

CHAPTER XIV

THE RHETORIC OF THE TRIAL

1

Bottini refers to himself as "Law's son." (IX, 1560) He is proud of his filial connections, but sardonic about their implications. When he concludes his speech to the judges, he declares with mock servility that he himself is impotent, that only Law, "helped by the acumen of the Court," can make truth triumphant. "What other prize than truth were worth the pain?" (IX, 1569) he asks rhetorically, giving the judges what he knows they want to hear. He is aware that the inflated talk about the search for truth is all part of austere courtroom procedure, that the dignity and high seriousness of the Roman tribunal is part fact and part sham, and that the real contest is between Arcangeli and himself.

As Fisc, or prosecutor for the people of Rome, Bottini has his reputation at stake, and is obliged to strive for a conviction. Since Bottini must establish the rightness of the ordinary processes of the Law, at the same time that Guido has indicated that only Law can satisfactorily explain and justify his actions, Bottini finds himself in something

of a dilemma. Guido's appeal is based on his presumption that, whatever he has done, Law will step in and protect him. Bottini objects to this post facto attitude. He points out that had Guido brought in his case before he considered murder, he might have received some redress. Bottini is, of course, aware that Guido has already received partial redress from the courts from his previous trial in May; but his point is that the judges in the Hall of Justice would probably be inclined to be favorable towards him again. In any case, Bottini gets across a point that, under other circumstances, might have been considered a commonplace: that Law was not created at the convenience of men like Guido, but rather, that Guido is one part of all the people who must obey the law.

Law, says Bottini, admits Pompilia's indiscretion. Law looks upon Pompilia's affair with Capponsacchi with a brow "maternally severe," but Law considers such a flaw in Pompilia as being understandably human. Bottini is arguing that Law--and he has by now managed to invest it with anthropomorphic characteristics--regards the murder as an instance where the punishment exceeds outrageously the crime. Adultery is common, forgivable, even under normal circumstances; add to this that conditions were not normal in Guido's household and Pompilia's adultery is not only understandable but inevitable.

Bottini, in his assertions, must first fend off

Arcangeli's accusations; he chooses to reply on much the same level and in much the same tone as his "fat opponent" had asserted--that Pompilia has committed the adultery. He considers the possibility of her innocence but it does not appeal to him; he is hard-hearted, he seems to say; he is not Fisc for nothing, he seems to suggest; he has been around law-courts too long not to know that people who break the law are occasionally weak-willed, particularly in such matters as crimes of passion.

He is obliged to establish the ignorant, child-like and innocent nature of Pompilia; this in turn makes it necessary for him to consider the possibility that Pompilia did not commit adultery. From his point of view, it damages Pompilia's case to argue on these grounds. The Court, and the people of Rome, are too worldly to consider the possibility seriously. It is better, Bottini feels, to lean toward the possibility of adultery (without actually admitting anything) and then demonstrate that the punishment far outweighs the crime. Thus, in the final analysis, the People's case is identical to Arcangeli's defense: Bottini feels the punishment by Guido does not fit the crime which Pompilia committed; Arcangeli argues that, honoris causa, the crime more than merits the punishment. The case becomes a matter of degree rather than kind. The arguments on both sides are typically pragmatic, utilitarian and relative. They are based on the typical behavior of the people of the times. From Bottini's

viewpoint, we would all more or less succumb to this kind of behavior; it is in the nature of us to have affairs, to lie, to forge letters, to assume guises of respectability and unimpugned dignity (like the Court) or guises of innocence and naivete (like Pompilia) or guises of wounded pride and damaged honor and reputation (like Guido) or guises of moral obligation, fiery dramatic denunciations, and priestly duties (like Caponsacchi). These are all roles we play, the masks we conveniently take on and off, depending on where we are and what we are doing. Most of Bottini's statements either declare or imply that human beings are like this. Bottini has no sense of the heroic in man; if a man's reach should exceed his grasp--or a woman's--it is not for heaven, but for other, more immediate and practical needs, such as financial problems or complex marital and interpersonal difficulties--what Pompilia called "gold so much--birth, power, repute so much,/ Or beauty, youth so much." (VII, 1831-32) Bottini assumes that these are the basic motivations. When people play roles it is not a matter of creating better or worse realities for themselves. People assume roles of dignity, integrity, heroism, innocence, generosity and the like in order to realize more practical ends--that it is all a game and we all have to play it. It is in this sense that he understands Guido's protest and appeal to Law; Law's stepping in is also part of the game. Bottini knows why Guido expects to be protected, just as other noblemen

have been protected by the mask of Law for hundreds of years. In Guido's case, Bottini argues that Guido simply went too far. It is after he has established this vital point that he goes on to tack on the vestures of some of Law's supposedly metaphysical attributes; only then does he claim that Law can "display, make triumph truth"; in the meantime he has successfully argued the case on practical grounds; he has answered Arcangeli's challenge in their private contest; and he has done it all under the guise of "Law's son"--his own role that he mock-seriously sees for himself. Law is a good mother, he implies, knowing the nonsense behind his statement. More deeply, he believes that Law is made up of a myth--that people like him and Arcangeli help sustain that myth--but once one starts believing in his own nonsense, as Arcangeli seems to do, then he is in danger of slipping as a lawyer; he gets in dangerous and shadowy territory. One needs to remember that people operate under the guise of pretense and convenience; this applies to Law as it does to anything else.

"Still," he says, "it pays." (IX, 1577)

2

A major issue in the trial is Pompilia's innocence; this is the issue which both Bottini and Arcangeli deliberately confuse. It is not to the advantage of either lawyer to consider her innocence. There is no search for truth here, be-

cause truth is an irrelevancy.

Although both argue on the same grounds, Bottini's intentions are broader than Arcangeli's. He is able to move up and down across the various layers of motivation and premeditation which lie behind the actions of many of the people involved in Pompilia's death. However, he is not successful when he does this, because his "artistic" instincts are used for personal gain; Bottini does not have a sense of sympathy with others; he pays lip service to this "poor, luckless girl" and her innocence, but from his rhetoric, from his use of irony, from his "asides," it is obvious that he is unaware of Pompilia's "white light." Cook calls attention to this when discussing Bottini; he states that Browning wanted to show "how utterly men fail to recognize the highest when they see it." And this shortcoming is compounded when it is found in the law, which has been appointed to defend the just.[1]

Hence, though Bottini's legal strategy is no doubt effective, it is well to point out that, being the kind of person he is, there was no other strategy that he could have made use of. His prosecution turns curiously into a defense as he feels compelled to explain Pompilia's behavior, rather than prosecute Guido's crime. He succumbs to the temptation to exercise his artistic abilities in painting a

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[1]Cook, Commentary, p. 182.

portrait of Pompilia which is nowhere close to the truth. He begins to run through a series of "What if's" and he here damages his case; he puts himself in a position of defending Pompilia's guilt while he is all the while asserting her innocence. The fact that he will even take up Arcangeli's charges against Pompilia is proof enough that he is not convinced of her innocence; but to answer the charges--even while maintaining that they are non-existent--with a string of absurd rationalizations almost turns the trial into a mockery. Rationalizations themselves require creative ability, particularly creative ability that is mis-applied. The real Pompilia is lost somewhere in this artistic shuffle, and it is up to the Pope to rediscover the "white light" and hard core which is at the center of Pompilia's personality.

3

Bottini gets caught up in and is seduced by his own artistic abilities. He has exposed his own belief that life is a matter of role-playing and that roles are put on and off for the sake of convenience. Law, too, has a role to play in this drama and previously for noblemen it also was put on for the sake of convenience. If noblemen got into trouble they could usually count on Law to put on its austere vestments and with some legal hocus-pocus, get them off with a slap on the wrist. Law fools Guido in this respect, largely because Bottini is successful in reversing aristocratic

society's usual attitudes about Law's function.

But Bottini cannot leave well enough alone. As he prepares his argument, he looks upon it as a painter might regard his finished canvas, or a rhetorician might look upon the artistically persuasive techniques of his speech. He compares himself to an epic poet and says he's going to plunge right into the middle of this murder and this marriage. (IX, 217-18) He is not going to paint a portrait of the whole family--just Pompilia. (IX, 162-70) And then, after going through his absurd and damaging statements in which he all but admits the charges that Arcangeli lays against her, he says it is difficult for a painter to do justice to such perfection, to paint a true effigiem of a saint. (IX, 1397-98) Bottini wants to satisfy everybody's suspicions and then allay them; it means nothing to him, except the artistic satisfaction he takes from overpowering his audience.

The trial is like a play and he, as the principal playwright, wants to weigh carefully the effects his artistry will have on the judges, on his legal opponent, Arcangeli and indeed, on all the citizens of Rome.

He begins his speech by a lengthy analogy involving a painter whom Bottini imagines to have been commissioned by the Court to paint Joseph and Mary's flight into Egypt. The painter, Bottini declares, cannot be just a good draughtsman; he has to go to the very bone of the bodies he portrays

on canvas, in order to get at their inmost secrets; he needs to signify "each notch and nodule." (IX, 36) But even after this is completed, the work of the artist is not all done. "Not a whit!" says Bottini. The painter must now rise to art's surface from her depth; he has been to the innermost core of the painting; now the painter must begin to paint his way out, as it were; this, indeed, is the hardest task of all.

But this is what Bottini implies he will do. He will get to the very core of the principals of this murder trial; he will analyze and legalize with his artistic brush strokes operating at full strength, and get right down to the bone of the people in the trial; he will get to the heart of the matter; once inside, with his painter's eye, he will begin to work his way back toward the surface after uncovering layers of premeditation, motivation, lies, forgeries, illicit love and spurious heroics; he will "display, make triumph truth."

The only trouble is, unlike his painter in the analogy, who is a true artist and is totally committed to his art, Bottini does not believe any of it. While committed to the law, he does not believe in the law, and instead of attempting to extend his own values and his own reality, Bottini corrupts his artistic talents by creating in a sort of vacuum; it is because he cannot define the true reality; he does not know where it is; he cannot identify it; all he knows

is the mask, the role-playing, the stage-acting. He does not assume a role, as Caponsacchi does, in order to test out new aspects of reality; he plays the role to extend the very world of non-reality and fakery that he knows so well. Thus his creative abilities are subverted because Bottini does not really have any goals for them; he uses them because they fascinate him. The result is that they rebound; he is inspired to use his artistic abilities but he has no clear idea of "what for." He does not really need them for his case; in fact, when he uses them in connection with answering Arcangeli's charges about Pompilia's motivations, he gets into difficulty; instead of working his way back up to the surface of the trial, as he has told us he is going to do, he gets in deeper and deeper as he loses more and more control over the false portrait of Pompilia that he is creating.

And the only purpose is the short-term satisfaction he gets from manipulating the principals involved, and from the material gain he realizes. He can only end by saying sardonically and philosophically, "Still, it pays." (IX, 1577) In this sense, as an artist, Bottini genuinely "sells out."

CHAPTER XV

THE POPE AS LAW

1

Innocent XII must call upon the utmost imaginative resources of his mind to finally pass judgment on the case; in this way he helps to create the very decision which becomes objectified in the poem.

He is eighty-six years old and, sitting alone in his study, with only a table and a chair and a light, he has been examining the relevant documents pertaining to the case all day long and far into the night. A messenger has been for hours standing outside his door, waiting to carry the Pope's decree back to the prison where Guido resides.

It has rained most of this cold February day.; There is a winter chill about the city, the rain turning into an icy mist, the sky gray, the walls of the Vatican forbidding and gloomy. The Pope has no audience; he is alone. Yet, as he soliloquizes he summons before him a number of imaginary listeners and his tone and the things he says are appropriate to the people whom he is addressing. He talks to his alter ego, the person he was before he became Pope--Antonio Pignatelli of Naples. He addresses many of the principals involved

either directly or indirectly in the case: Guido, Marzi-Medici (the Governor of Arezzo), the Archbishop, Pompilia, Caponsacchi, the Comparini and an "hypothetical tribunal of 'educated' men."[1] The Pope also carries on a lengthy imaginary conversation with Euripides. And, much of the time, he addresses himself to God, whose presence he feels even when he is addressing others. Thus alone, the Pope has more freedom in reviewing the case than he would were he speaking to a real audience.

As he begins his soliloquy we quickly learn that he has already made his decision. After wrangling for more than a month, the Court has found Guido guilty. Guido's lawyers instantly appealed to the Pope on the grounds of clerical privilege. The Pope has only just received the appeal. He does not delay. After thoroughly examining all the pleadings, legal documents and other pertinent arguments in the case, he states that "Truth, nowhere, lies yet everywhere in these," (X, 228) and what is found in those documents is enough to tell him that "today/ Is Guido's last." (X, 336)

Even though he has already made his decision, we discover that he has not really "made" the decision at all. He must make it now, as an artist makes an object. As he has been studying the documents during the day, he slowly unravels the intricacies of the case, rather like a writer or poet

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[1]Honan, p. 151. Honan discusses the Pope's various listeners and how, in this way, the Pope can move freely through the issues of the case.

gathering material for his next book. The material has no form; it is merely a collection of pleadings and other extra-legal pamphlets and letters. The Pope knows, at the end of his survey, what his decision is, just as a poet knows what his book will be, but he has not yet given it an articulate, artistic form. Thus he feels morally obliged to structure the decision, to objectify it, to give it a reality of its own.

It is not that he mistrusts his judgment. But he must question it. He realizes that he is human and fallible, yet all he can do is proceed in spite of it. God, he reasons, gave him "So much of judging faculty, no more." (X, 265) If his decision proves to be a mistake, he will have no apologies to make. He knows that given all the circumstances he has done his duty and done it well. In short, he knows that his motives are pure. "I stand on my integrity," he tells us. I have no fear at all. "And if I hesitate,/ It is because I need to breathe awhile." (X, 276-77) He feels a need to rest, to review the motivations of the actors in this drama; he wants to see the seeds behind the acts, "the tree."

2

The Pope explains "why Guido is found reprobate." (X, 398) And we might remember that in theology the term "reprobate" refers to one rejected by God, excluded from salvation and lost in sin. When Guido began in life he had

most of the things necessary to make that life satisfying. He had a "Body and mind in balance, a sound frame,/ A solid intellect." (X, 402-03) He had the "wit to seek,/ Wisdom to choose, and courage wherewithal" (X, 403-04) to cope with any of life's experiences. Of course, the Pope concedes he had drawbacks. But what is life without them? Here on earth, in our first stage of living, stumbling blocks can be turned into stepping-stones if we meet the challenges.

Thus, says the Pope, here is Guido, and he has the same appetite for life as the rest of us. But he "lacks food." (X, 413) Instead his eyes begin to search for outlets; he "pines/ After the good things just outside the grate." (X, 418) Part of the make-up of his personality is that he has less qualm in being greedy and grasping than what man ordinarily is furnished with inside himself. On the surface he accepts God's rule and recognizes the Church. In fact, he pushes himself as far into the Church as a layman could. But he clothed himself with the protection of the Church so that he might violate the law with impunity. His brothers Paul and Girolamo are no better and joined the Church for the same kind of protection. But Guido is the most irreligious because he is "religion's parasite." (X, 453)

The Pope continues, "I find him bound, then, to begin life well." (X, 477) He had the advantages of birth, breeding, social position, and had the Church as his guide.

Instead of expanding from these advantages Guido "shrinks up like the ambiguous fish." (X, 485) He separates his flesh from the shell and begins to steal around by moonlight preying on others. He crawls with the "loose and free,/ Sand fly and slush-worm at their garbage-feast,/ A naked blotch no better than they all." (X, 497-99) He has forsaken his nobility, slipped out of the Church, "Plays trickster if not cutpurse," places his "body and soul/ Prostrate among the filthy feeders." (X, 501-02) And then, when Law catches up with him at last, as he is feeding on his "carrion-prey," the incredible Guido points to the shell he crawled out of and "left high and dry" and says "'the case out yonder is myself!'" (X, 506) But no, Law finally told him, here is the real you. Law had its prongs out, probing carefully among Guido's peers, the "Congenial vermin" with whom he associated. That shell is none of you, Law told him, as they begin to slowly get their hooks into his flesh. Here is what we want.

"For I find this black mark to impinge the man," the Pope tells us. That black mark consists in the absolute fact that Guido believes "in just the vile of life." (X, 511) Are such things as "Low instinct, base pretension,"--are these the truth? Over his vile nature Guido put on the mask of honesty. It is a falsehood "scale on scale," one falsehood overlaying the other, so that it is difficult to get down to Guido's true nature. The honor and faith he pretended to were

a "lie and a disguise," and the Pope extends this observation to include mankind. Most are like this, he admits. "All say good words," but do bad deeds; "so thrive mankind!" (X, 519)

In Guido's case, the very sum and substance of his soul can be found in his marriage. The Pope tells us that he will test out his judgment of Guido by once again examining that marriage in the light of all he now thinks and believes about Guido.

To begin with, Guido entered into the marriage contract without the motives that should have prompted him to marriage. He took the farthest means that were appropriate to the action to achieve the proper ends of marriage. "The best, he knew and feigned, the worst he took." (X, 535) It was because his "worst" was so bad that Guido is being judged so harshly. There are marriages of convenience[1] and although the Pope does not pause to comment on them, the implication is that Guido's marriage was so much more, so much less, and so much worse, that the usual marriage of convenience. If it

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[1]Even though Browning is artistically justified in committing what is really an anachronism (since the Pope seems to have a nineteenth century Victorian attitude toward marriage, rather than a seventeenth century Italian attitude) it is curious that he did not find another means for expressing the Pope's beliefs. (See Cook, p. 199, p. 209) Of course, it seems apparent that the poem's historical level is the least successful of the various levels upon which the poem operates. At any rate, it has always caused the most difficulty, and led to the most misunderstanding among critics. Early scholarship on the poem was preoccupied with Browning's presumed faithfulness to his source material; each time Browning deviated from his source, there was often an implied accusation in the remarks of particular critics, as if he had no artistic license to do so.

had been that simple, then all would have been well. Marriages of convenience are one thing; marriages out of greed and evil are another.

You see, in Guido's case, "Not one permissible impulse moves the man." (X, 536) What is his truth? Why, his instinct, he claims. It is that which "sinks man past level of the brute." A brutish appetite becomes a truth of its own. The appetite is a "lust for money: to get gold,--/ Why, lie, rob, if it must be, murder!" (X, 540-43) Guido lures his victims into the "clutch of hate" by a love that is mere pretense. This is what he did in the case of the Comparini and Pompilia. Guido saw all the possibilities. It was as if he had drawn a picture in his mind: first he would drive the old couple out of his house "stunned and echoless" and then "feast on their heart" with the "lamb-like child his prey." (X, 557-58) Then, after he had plundered them to "the last remnant of their wealth," he would turn to her, who was past hope of receiving help in this world, "mute and motionless,/ His slave, his chattel, to use and then destroy." (X, 564)

When the Comparini tricked him, he satiated his malice by punishing her. The Pope believes Pompilia's revolt was inevitable and justifiable. But she did not attempt this at first. She was resigned to die and in this way she foiled Guido's simple cruelty. Guido, seeing this method blunted, developed a "consummate lie" regarding a love-intrigue that

he claimed existed between Pompilia and Caponsacchi.

We know that the letters are false, the Pope argues. It is not a matter of "just handwriting and mere authorship." (X, 650) The letters are false to the body and soul of Pompilia. Ironically, the letters eventually achieve their effect: for the two are brought together. The Pope admits that once wife and priest stand together where no wife or priest should be, "there is passion in the place,/ Power in the air for evil as for good." (X, 660-61) It could have gone either way, the Pope argues. When they meet, we see the danger, the "Promptings from heaven and hell." (X, 662) But the window in which Caponsacchi first saw her is a shrine, the "pavement of the street is holy ground." There is no bard to describe in verse "how Christ prevailed/ And Satan fell like lightning," (X, 670-71) that night at Pompilia's window.

Why talk about it? the Pope asks. What does the world do when they are told the truth but lie the more? Here is an example of the "gift of God who showed for once/ How he would have the world go white." (X, 680-81) But the white is lost in the world's gray. It is almost as if Caponsacchi and Pompilia were born with "a new tribute.../ Champion of truth." (X, 683) And they used that tribute to protect themselves "Of their new noble nature." (X, 685) Courage is what they had and used. Here is Guido, hoping to take them by surprise at Castlenuovo, but "how fares he when face to face/

With Caponsacchi? Who fights, who fears now?" (X, 693) Guido quakes like a coward, becomes even more fearful when his own sword is raised against him by his wife.

In the trial itself, the Pope believes the judges were not too far off the mark when they sent Caponsacchi into exile and Pompilia into a convent. But Guido learns nothing from the trial and continues to find his sport in "torch-light treachery." (X, 723) Months later, after the birth of his son, Guido's heart is stirred to murder. Instead of thanking God, and cutting his soul free from thinking about the case, Guido shouts, "'Soul, at last the mire is thine!'" And in that mire Guido will henceforth wallow.

The murder itself did not succeed because "Guido must needs trip on a stumbling-block/ Too vulgar, too absurdly plain i' the path!" (X, 811-12) Guido, a resident of Rome for thirty years, neglected to secure the necessary ticket to ride horses out of Rome's gates. If he had, he would have easily reached the Tuscan border and have been protected by that "Satire of a sentence" handed down by the Court in Arezzo. To what can we accredit this mistake? What is it but the "Touch of the fool in Guido the astute!" (X, 852) The Pope realizes, too, that Guido curses the omission more than he does the murder. Moreover, it was actually a stroke of luck that he did not get the ticket because his four friends were planning to murder him on the way back to Arezzo, since he had withheld the money he had promised them. Thus,

the Pope maintains, right up to the last, "greed found itself at odds/ With craft in thee." (X, 863-64)

This is the way the Pope finds Guido: he is the "midmost blotch of black" that can be discerned in "this group of clustered crimes." (X, 868-69) The Pope can also detect the others hovering around in the cave now exposed to daylight. Guido's brother Paul is in some ways even more reprehensible, "This fox-faced horrible priest." Why, he says, "mere wolfishness looks well,/ Guido stands honest in the red o' the flame," (X, 880-81) compared to the sickly yellow that Paul has used to pass for white. Paul has managed to stay clear of the trap and even though his case will not come up in the Pope's time, there will be a judgment levied against him.

The youngest brother, Girolamo, is a hybrid--part violence and part craft--and he has one other distinctive quality which is lacking in the other two, and that quality is lust. He is more than a match for the "yellow and the red." His case, too, is reserved, but it will come due. Then there is the mother, that "gaunt grey nightmare" who gave "these three abortions birth." (X, 911) She has turned motherhood to shame.

The four assistants who went with Guido, "These God-abandoned wretched lumps of life," were "country-folk" and had not been exposed to "unwholesome civic breath" or the "curse o' the court." (X, 927-28) They were also young,

with their lives still ahead of them. They did not follow Guido out of loyalty. He said to them, "'Anywhere, anyhow and anywhy,/ Murder me some three people, old and young.'" Murder them even though you have never heard their names, "'and be paid/ So much.'" (X, 944-45) All four instantly agreed without demur.

The Governor of Arezzo was one of those "complacent lookers-on that laugh," shake their heads, but would never interfere, because that would make what is bad worse. Marzi-Medici, the Governor of Arezzo, is indeed a "Fit representative of law." (X, 973) What did he give but "A shrug o' the shoulder, a facetious word/ Or wink, traditional with Tuscan wits." (X, 978-79)

As for the Archbishop, here is one of the Pope's own subordinates, just as the Pope is subordinate to God. Here is one chosen by God and Pope to "do the shepherd's office" and feed the flock. But when this one particular lamb pressed within the reach of his staff, the wolf panting after her, the shepherd could only turn and flee.

"Such denizens of the cave," the Pope concludes, "now cluster round/ And heat the furnace sevenfold." (X, 993-94) Even in this cave's darkness there is a stray "beauty-beam" of light, much to the despair of hell.

3

Pompilia is the "First of the first." She is "Perfect in whiteness." (X, 1005) He asks Pompilia to stoop down to

him, "Give one good moment to the poor old Pope." (X, 1006) In this murder case, the Pope sees a symbol of the world's corruption. He is "Heart-sick at having all the world to blame." (X, 1007) It is obvious to him that Guido is a disease of the times. He feels the sense of failure in his own office. As head of the Church, he sees the Church's culpability in the crime. Pompilia's whiteness is a beam which lights up the world's darkness. "Let me enjoy the old clean linen garb," (X, 1009) the Pope says. He is tired of seeing what the world offers--man trying to intellectualize and rationalize, man putting up his knowledge because he lacks faith. Pompilia is "earth's flower," growing among this dark climate.

He admits that "It was not given Pompilia to know much,/ Speak much, to write a book, to move mankind." (X, 1019-20) It was her "purity and patience," the faith she held fast to in spite of the "plucking fiend," which enabled her to rise. If there is any virtue in "right returned for wrong, most pardon for worst injury," (X, 1026) then the Pope might finally have "Just the one prize," that he is really unworthy of, after ten years of being head of the Church. He is like a gardener who has tilled his barren ground all the long day and now, as it grows toward dusk, he discovers "At least one blossom" to make him proud. The seeds which he planted in the best section of his garden, growing, "made fat by the master's eye," yield a "timid leaf," and "uncertain

bud." While here is a seed planted by chance, "sprang up by the wayside 'neath the foot/ Of the enemy." (X, 1041-42) This flower "breaks all into blaze,/ Spreads itself, one wide glory of desire." (X, 1042-43) It spreads out to welcome and incorporate the sun's light that it loves. "My/ Flower, my rose," he says, "I gather for the breast of God." (X, 1046)

He has much to praise in her, but the thing he praises most is that she was obedient to the end. She acted "According to the light alloted" by law. That is, she obeyed the laws and customs regarding women in her time. She was first dutiful to the "foolish parents," then "Submissive next to the bad husband." (X, 1051-52) She proved herself so patient that she could "rise from law to law,/ The old to the new," until she suddenly was promoted by God to a "new service." This new duty was to no longer bear her oppressors, but "henceforth fight." She was to "Endure man and obey God." (X, 1060)

She despised life so much she did not wish to continue it until she learned of her new duty. God told her "'Value life, and preserve life for My sake.'" (X, 1065) She did, at the first prompting at what the Pope calls God, "And fools call Nature," heard, comprehended, and accepted the obligations laid on her, "Mother elect, to save the unborn child." (X, 1075) There is a common pact among them all, "brute and bird, reptile and the fly" to "worthily defend that trust of trusts,/ Life from the Ever Living." God, the

ever-living, entrusted them with the obligation of bringing forth life. And this, inspite of Guido and all his machinations, she did. She won the victory. "Go past me," the Pope says, "and get thy praise." The Pope feels the power of her faith and her new reality. And he hopes that she will be "not far to seek/ Presently when I follow if I may!" (X, 1092-93)

4

The Pope tells Caponsacchi that he is not so very far from Pompilia himself, this "warrior-priest." (X, 1095) He is the "Irregular noble scapegrace," whose actions prove that in the whole business he was "faulty." Yet, the Pope says, "ours the fault," because we are the ones who "still misteach, mislead, throw hook and line," and play with our priests as though they were timid birds.

But here was one who denied their teachings, here is one who "shut fire/ I' the stone," one who could leap from the mouth of the Church "at sword's first stroke," and act in "lamps of love and faith." Caponsacchi displayed that true kind of chivalry, "That dares the right and disregards alike/ The yea and nay of the world." (X, 1114-15)

"Do I smile?" asks the Pope. Am I indulgent with this wayward son? "Nay, Caponsacchi, much I find amiss,/ Blameworthy, punishable." (X, 1127-28) In Caponsacchi was "this freak/ Of thine, this youth prolonged though age was

ripe." (X, 1128-29) Caponsacchi delayed his maturity, turned aside from his responsibilities. Instead he put on a "masquerade in sober day," and even that disguise had two changes of costume, for he was from time to time in either the "hypocrite's disguise" or the "fool's costume." (X, 1131-32) Yet beneath this lie the Pope sees Caponsacchi's "healthy rage" when the latter first encountered Guido and Pompilia.

Of course, the Pope sees that Caponsacchi was partially drawn toward the affair because it gave him an opportunity for "impulsive and prompt self-display," (X, 1146) and he has no wish to revoke the penalty the priest received when he was banished to Civita for three years. But Caponsacchi's reaction to Pompilia was immediate and unerringly right. It was "such championship/ Of God" that the Pope looks for in vain from those self-styled gallants who gave Pompilia no help at all, while Caponsacchi, disguised in "mask and motley, pledged to dance not fight,/ Sprang'st forth the hero." (X, 1167-68) And the Pope finds it easy to believe that Caponsacchi stayed pure throughout the battle. The Pope sees that Caponsacchi was undoubtedly tempted by Pompilia's physical presence. Was the "Temptation sharp?" There is no question of it. And we should thank God that it was. The stronger the temptation, the more strength it gives to the man who can meet and master it.

Those churchmen who were trained to cope and care for Pompilia's needs failed her, and all because of the very pains

the Church went to in order to train them. Then, along comes a society priest--who used his sword-hand to compose ditties on the lute, whose "sentry-station," rather than being at the Church door, was usually "at some wanton's gate"--this man pushed forward and showed his mettle. "Well done!" the Pope commends him. You should be glad, he tells Caponsacchi, that you have "let light into the world," even though it was by means of "that irregular breach o' the boundary." And now that he has found his path, he should continue to march assured, "Learning anew the use of soldiership." Moreover, he will continue to learn anew those other qualities which in the depths of his heart he has always known. The Pope sees Caponsacchi's new order of things: "Self-abnegation, freedom from all fear,/ Loyalty to life's end." (X, 1208-09) This is the new reality. The Pope knows that Caponsacchi in the face of everything--all the forces bent on destroying his way--has re-created the beliefs which exist in the life and heart of heaven.

What impresses him is that he sees that Pompilia and Caponsacchi bear kinship to him; they know that the case ultimately does not contain both right and wrong; the Pope sees the same thing; so too does Guido. Those other principals in the drama, however, never see this. In the case of Half-Rome, The Other Half-Rome, Tertium Quid, Arcangeli, and Bottini, though they might argue for one side or the other, or as Tertium Quid does, for both sides, they all fail to

see the fallacy of sophisticatedly assuming that there is both right and wrong in the case.

The Pope sees the problem clearly. When he comes to a consideration of the part Pietro and Violante played in the drama, he characterizes them as being examples of this ambivalence in Roman society. The two of them trudge somewhere between "the best and worst." (X, 1212) They are the "Makeshift, starved samples of humanity." They are both "Foul and fair,/ Sadly mixed natures." (X, 1217) They were "self-indulgent,--yet/ Self-sacrificing too." They had a love for their child which was remarkable, yet they also exercised craft, avarice, vanity, and spite. They must accept their death, taught what happens to "The ambiguous creature." Man must, the Pope insists, commit himself. He cannot have both the white and the black, in an attempt to neutralize the effects of both. White cannot neutralize the black, the Pope contends. Nor can good compensate for the bad in man, or absolve him either. "Life's business," he says, is after all "just the terrible choice." (X, 1237)

Caponsacchi, after years of such ambivalence himself, recognized the white instantly when it flashed in front of him at the theatre, and he did not deny the truest part of himself; he met the challenge, made his choice, and committed himself completely to his own beliefs. In committing himself, he brought these beliefs to life and made them real.

5

The Pope must now turn to a reconsideration of his own fallibility. He says he does not doubt himself nor his judgment. It is difficult enough, he admits, to find truth in the "human sphere"; yet he claims that his eyes have grown sharp by use. He knows he has the imaginative ability to "find truth," that he can separate "the shine from shade." (X, 1242) He suggests that actually all people have this talent, if they would exercise it. He has found truth, only "As a mere man may, with no special touch." (X, 1243) He knows that the talk in Rome is that he is senile, but he believes the problem is not one of reasoning so much, but one partly of "hard work and good will." The other part of the problem is handled by "A habitude that gives a blind man sight,/ At the practised finger-ends of him." (X, 1247-48) The Pope has a feel for the truth, for recognizing it when he touches it. Furthermore, he is willing to risk the consequences of his decrees. He admits that in the case before him he might be making a mistake. But this is the way it has to be.

The Pope considers the arguments people might advance against his ability to pass judgment. He claims his "poor spark had for its source, the sun." This is the best we have and we must use it. "All that I do and am," he states, "Comes from the truth." It is truth that he has either seen or surmised. It is the only kind of truth he knows and all

he knows he speaks. He might have misinterpreted heaven's message, but how could he know anything if he did. If people deny the light he shows, "shall I too lack courage?" (X, 1298) Certainly he is taking the risk that he might be making a mistake. But does that mean he is supposed to leave his post like those people whom he now blames for leaving theirs?

In a prayer, he acknowledges to God that man's mind is like a convex glass which gathers in all the "scattered points/ Picked out of the immensity of the sky." (X, 1311-12) Within man's mind, these points reunite, they are our heaven on earth, "our God revealed to man." Here in our mind God is revealed "as a whole proportioned to our sense." (X, 1316) "There," (which, the Pope admits, is nowhere, but we do not have other words to describe it) God is "absolute immensity." Different and diverse modes of the life God has made come to know Him. This involves the purpose of life. Thus the Pope asks parenthetically, why do any of us live except for love? And how can we love unless we know Him?

The Pope argues that in the story of Christ we find a tale of God's, told by "the world's mouth," but credible nevertheless. "I love it with my heart," the Pope says. (X, 1349) Moreover, he has tried it with his reason and believes it to be sound. Regard it in this way, he states. Man's mind is the most superior on earth. But do we not find that there is a matter of cause involved?

The Pope argues closely, almost confusingly, as he

unravels the intricacies of his own complex judgments. Thus, man is "strong, intelligent and good" up to that height or point which he conceives to be possible for himself. Man has had enough of the "low" in life. Leave that to the other animals. Man wishes to soar to the conceivable height. Man wants to find the cause of all those effects he sees in the world. He sees them as evidence that some works in the world were not made by man. Then they are probably God's.

But let us try to speculate from another point of view. Suppose we judge the worker by the work? It is not always easy to see God if we consider the world's evidence by itself. We find strength, yes, and intelligence. But goodness? "Not to the human eye in the present state." (X, 1364) In other words, in this world, we seem to always be lacking "just the instant which this tale supplies/ Of love without a limit." (X, 1367-68) This is the reason the story of Christ means so much to the Pope; here we find a love that is "Unlimited in its self-sacrifice." Just as strength and intelligence seem always never to reach a limit in man, so too is love unlimited.

What is beyond the tale? I feel in the dark here, past the tale, the Pope says; I feel what I cannot see and I still have faith. Of course there is sin and sorrow in the world but the Pope can believe in the dread machinery because it was devised by God to bring out the moral qualities of man. The central moral quality, acquired through pain, is that we learn that we love and in turn are beloved. Thus we are

"creative and self-sacrificing too." Eventually, we are "God-like" ourselves. When Christ said, "'I have said ye are Gods,'" was it said for nothing?

In our fallibility, truth might pass through a spectrum before it hits man's eyes. Is it so important that we cannot perceive the absolute, independent truth? Perhaps what we see is the truth in a new form suitable for our eyes, just as the beasts cannot see the truths that we see. What does it matter so long as the effects are the same? What care I, the Pope asks, if God strikes our hearts with a gloved hand or a bare one? And the Pope is not much perplexed by the riddles of this world which have not yet been solved.

The Pope's belief is that "life is a training and a passage." We are here for a short time. "The moral sense grows but by exercise." He must continue to use his, even though he is old and near the end of his own life. Man on earth is on probation; he is being initiated into Godship. He is set here "to make/ A fairer moral world than this he finds." (X, 1417) He is morally obligated to guess at that which will be known hereafter.

Let us consider the present problem. Here is a case which seems to deny what he has just said. For Pompilia, "a faultless creature," has been destroyed. Sin has "had its way i' the world where God should rule." (X, 1421) We see "Pompilia lost and Guido saved." But note the "irrelevant circumstance" of the Pope's interference into the case.

Does Guido win after all?

Nor should it astonish us in the end that there are men like Guido who can "reject and disbelieve," who can "subordinate the future to the present," who can sin and yet not have the slightest fear of sinning. Even so, the Pope would still point to the foremost fact that "Life is probation and this earth no goal/ But starting-point of man." (X, 1435-36)

What does astonish the Pope is the fact that most of those who find faith, "these favoured ones," should suddenly turn away from faith with a kind of "double-zest." What do these faithful few do to keep their "robes of white unspotted by the world?" (X, 1452) Here is that Aretine, the Archbishop, who is under the Pope as the Pope is under God. The Pope points out that he "armed and decked" this "Champion of the faith" and pushed him forward to the position he held when Pompilia came to his door pleading, "'Protect me from the fiend.'" No, the Archbishop told her, for Guido is headstrong and dangerous. "'He needs some bone to mumble, help amuse/ The darkness of his den with.'" (X, 1462-63)

Has the Church been wrong all the time in training men like the Archbishop to be weak when they need to be strong? Have we sapped their strength by too much teaching? Have we "Made an archbishop and undone a saint?" (X, 1469)

Then there was the poor, lowly Friar who reneged on his promise to help Pompilia. Here was a man who was used to the hard life and strict discipline. Certainly no reason

for strength to be at ebb here. And yet the Friar concluded, "'Great ones could help yet help not: why should small?'" (X, 1483)

"These are the Christians" the Pope is talking about, "not the worldlings, not/ The skeptics." See how they "thus battle for the faith!" (X, 1485-86) The Convertites who housed Pompilia after the trial, are "prompt to testify/ To her pure life and saintly dying days." But immediately upon her death they file suit in court laying claim to all her possessions on the legal grounds that say that a convent is entitled to the possessions of proved prostitutes and adulterers. See how the "dove's note changes to the crow's cry?" (X, 1509) Why, the Pope cries, "scripture yields no parallel to this!"(X, 1524)

6

The Pope is thus confronted with the stark fact that "the representatives of the Church have been discredited by his investigations."[1] He despairs over the knowledge that the "faithful few" are no more faithful than the rest. Can this be the end and outcome of all his service? What kind of fruit is his own time yielding, this "seventeen-hundredth since God died for man?" Is this "the best yield of the latest time?" (X, 1533-34) Is this all he can take with him?

What is worse--and "how can I blink the fact?"--is

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[1]Cook, Commentary, p. 202.

that the orthodox channels whereby men are trained to serve God have been the reverse of that for which they were intended. Instead of doing good, the Church has apparently taught men to be obdurate to good. The Pope cannot ignore the fact that love and faith are supposed to spring from authoritative sources. But in the case before him, he cannot help but observe that love and faith have come from those not commissioned to bring it. "For see this priest," the Pope says, "this Caponsacchi, stung/ At the first summons." (X, 1555-56) He is asked to "play the man, pity the oppressed," and he does. He does not pause. He strikes any and all of his foes, sets out to right wrong at any risk. See the man! "All blindness, bravery and obedience!" (X, 1560) Did he say blind? "Ay, as a man would be inside the sun,/ Delirious with the plenitude of light." (X, 1564) Such a man, if he rush straight in, "how shall he go wrong?" (X, 1564)

So, during all this, "Where are the Christians?" We gave them truth, righteousness, faith, salvation, and the spirit--even the word of God. "Where these?" the Pope asks. "Slunk into corners!" (X, 1569-70) The Pope knows that there are friars of this order or that who would protest his harsh judgment and point to the "martyr-mark" they have left at every point when the Church called upon them. But he is not beguiled by this, because in spite of himself he must "speak loud what truth speaks low." Either they give "better than the best, or nothing serves!" (X, 1578-79)

Since they have not, the Pope has little to show for his stewardship to God. "And is this little all that was to be?" he asks despairingly. "Where is the gloriously-decisive change" that Christian conversion is supposed to bring, that he, as God's Vicar on earth, is presumed to be responsible for? After all, the metamorphosis from "human clay to divine gold" is what justifies the price we all pay. This consummate, intricate, sophisticated, complex approach we have evolved in the present time seems to yield not a single "grain more than the vulgar got/ By the old smelting-process years ago." (X, 1621-22) And if this is sad, does it not lead us to suspect the very power who created man, body and soul, and then "Ordained salvation for them both, and yet../ Well, is the thing we see, salvation?" (X, 1629-30) Is this the best we can do, this ambivalence we see in the present age? Does this not lead to doubt everlasting?

7

"I/ Put no such dreadful question to myself," the Pope tells us. He does not feel the necessity of asking such a question. Within his circle of experience has always burned a central truth--a power, a wisdom, a goodness--in short, God. You see, he tells us, "I must outlive a thing" before I know it is dead. If he lasts longer than it does, he knows it is no more. This is why his faith will never be gone until, say, he outlives the faith that there is a sun. If in the end he lies dead somewhere, "ashes to the very soul," then

"Someone, not I, must wail above the heap, 'He died in the dark whence never morn arose.'" (X, 1738) As far as he knows, day will always succeed the deepest night. His speech will always be that "throughout the darkness" that darkness will end and "'The light that did burn, will burn!'" Clouds can obscure that light, as they are doing in his own time, but that does not mean that all would be bright if they were to dissolve. Clouds are necessary to sooth the eye which would otherwise be blinded by the blaze. Naturally, faith has its weaknesses. This is the way it must be, because it is the very weakness in faith that supplies the "incentive to humanity," that tells us that on earth nothing has absolute strength; hence we have a need to help and to be helped. "How can man love but what he yearns to help?" (X, 1652) And that which man regards as a weakness within his strength, the angels know it is a stronger strength yet.

Such a weakness made strength is a re-enactment, a recreation, a thing made new, of the first laws that God put forth; it is a repetition of that miracle which is "The divine instance of self-sacrifice" that never ends and always begins for man.

Thus, the Pope fervently believes that as for himself, he could never miss his footing in this maze we call life. "No," the Pope says, "I have light nor fear the dark at all." (X, 1659) There is a weakness in his faith which makes his faith stronger yet. This is why he knows the light is there.

If he was strong--if the thing he sought was already there--there could be no need for faith, nor ultimately, life. There would be the absolute perfection, which would amount to no more and no less than a literal "living end."

8

The Pope must raise and resolve the question of those men who lived before the coming of Christ. What if some Greek bard or philosopher--say Euripides--were to come forward and put to him an important question? "'I was born not so long before Christ's birth,'" he tells the Pope. Your creed tells me that I lived under conditions that I could in no way escape, "'Whereby salvation was impossible.'" (X, 1688) Those impulses of the good and fair, of the pure and true, which men like Euripides might have held were "Being without a warrant or an aim," a rather sterile "felicity." Such phrases as "Know thyself," or "Take the golden mean" die just as quickly as the man who speaks them.

Euripides argues that since he was born to perish like the brutes, then why should he not live brutishly and by the brute law? But instead, he points out, he became an athlete in the gymnasium, a philosopher in the schools, a painter, a musician, and he then combined all these glories on the tragic stage. He adopted virtue as his rule of life. He "'waived all reward and loved for loving's sake.'" "'And, what my heart taught me, I taught the world,/ And have been

teaching now two thousand years.'" (X, 1712-13)

Euripides asks the Pope to examine his work. Perhaps his plays have pleased, perhaps they have displeased. But this is only incidental. For his plays "'shall teach/ For truth's sake.'" (X, 1716) He did this years before Paul ever spoke. He asks the Pope, "'How nearly did I guess at that Paul knew?'" His picture was true in his own time, he argues. For he asserted then that there was both good and bad, strong and weak, wisdom and folly, in the world. How can he have said there was no God, when someone so obviously ruled outside man's self? He made the gods a symbol for the hidden forces, the blind necessities of nature.

And what gods do, man has a right to criticize, to applaud or condemn. Why should he fear the truth? Man should be bold and concentrate on that which concerns him most--"'The law of his own life."" (X, 1755) He must decide for himself "'Which law is virtue and not vice.'" (X, 1756)

Now, Euripides wants to know, how could he have done any better under the circumstances? He had only fragmentary truths to go by. The Pope and his age now have the sunrise. The forces and necessity Euripides postulated have grown into God. Those beings who seemed so contrary and irrational and whom he called gods, proved to be God's maniform and multiform operation.

It was midnight in my time, Euripides argues. Would

the Pope dare pretend to punish him for creeping around on all-fours, finding his way in the dark? Nowadays it is different. Now the Pope and his kind reward teachers of the truth, "'Who miss the plain way in the blaze of noon.'" (X, 1784)

"How should I answer this Euripides?" the Pope asks. Our trouble is, "We have got too familiar with the light." (X, 1793) More and more, we are suffocated by the false light of earth. We hear earthly demands that "mankind serve God/ For man's sole sake, not God's and therefore man's." (X, 1820-21) We have come to the point where we can hardly distinguish "the sun/ From a mere Druid fire on a far mount." (X, 1822-23) Thus, Euripides deserves all the more praise because he could distinguish the true light from the false one.

But in our own time such insight does not seem possible. Now we live for the day, with a kind of "ignoble confidence," a "cowardly hardihood" that "Makes the old heroism impossible." (X, 1487-89) There is no self-sacrifice involved because the false light makes it easy and demands little.

However, the Pope feels a whisper of times to come. Is there a new age, to be ushered in by his death, which will "shake this torpor of assurance from our creed,/ Re-introduce the doubt discarded, bring/ The formidable danger back?" (X, 1852-55) Up through his time the authority of Christianity has never been questioned in settling "heresies" of one kind or another. Nowadays we have faith in the report.

Christianity tells us what we need to believe. But we need to disbelieve the report, and believe in the thing the report belies. Is there even now some truth "Unrecognized yet, but perceptible?" (X, 1871) Is it some truth that will "Correct the portrait by the living face,/ Man's God, by God's God in the mind of man?" (X, 1872-73) In other words, we need to substitute a living face for a picture; we need to put aside the image of God that man has put there; we need to receive the image of God that God offers to man's mind.

A few will rise to the new height, but many will sink "to the old depth." A few, even before they knew of this new law which the Pope feels is coming, kept the old. The new law is a re-creation of the old, but a few will never need it. These few hope that someday there will be another Pompilia who will come and say "'I know the right place by foot's feel,/ I took it and tread firm there.'" (X, 1885-90) But so many more, when the new law comes, will fall, and take their stand "On what is fact, the lust and pride of life!" (X, 1890-91)

The Pope sees that the mass of men, "whose very souls even now/ Seem to need re-creating" sink "Worm-like into the mud" that the new light now lays bare.

9

Thus, the Pope feels a new order coming in. "Do not we end, the century and I?" (X, 1902) There is an anti-

mask that is becoming impatient. He is knocking on the door of the new century. "Will I block the way?" the Pope asks. Look, says the Pope, "Here comes the first experimentalist/ In the new order of things,--he plays a priest." (X, 1909-10) The Pope is proud and exultant as he prepares to move off the stage. "Does he take inspiration from the Church?" the Pope asks. Does this man make the Church's rule his law of life? "Not he." For note: "his own mere impulse guides the man." (X, 1913) In the maze we have asked him to walk through, he has in the main taken the right step.

Now, the Pope wants to know, can he teach others how to acquit themselves, "Prove why this step was right, while that were wrong?" (X, 1922) How should he do it? And he answers, "'Ask your hearts as I asked mine." (X, 1923) But what if your heart misdirects you? Why then, Caponsacchi would answer, "'I quit the stage,/ And make amends,--be there amends to make.'" (X, 1925-26)

Of course, what of the Abate Paolo? He had his taste, and followed his heart too, but his heart told him to follow "the lowest of life's appetites." "'I live for greed, ambition, lust, revenge,'" he would say. He attains these ends by force or guile. Today he is perhaps a hypocrite but tomorrow he might be recognized as "'The rational man, the type of common sense.'" (X, 1940) Guido, too, followed the same guidance and in turn influenced the four clods whom he hired to be at his beck, as ready to murder him as anybody

else. "These are the world!" (X, 1947) the Pope exclaims.

Note the first result of the new order of things. There they lie, the old pair, "Of the weak head and not so wicked heart," and the one true Christian among them, this "mother, wife and girl." Those last qualities are three traits which seem "to make an angel up." The first step in the new order of things was taken on their heads!

Now that the Pope is close to his exit, he knows that he still owes his last act, as his first, to God. You see, God armed him thus, "With Paul's sword as with Peter's key." (X, 1957) He is the Pope, and once more he will smite with all his strength. "And when I raise my arm," he says incredulously, who has the temerity "to pluck at my sleeve?" Why, here are Guido's friends. "The facts being proved and incontestable,/ What is the last word I must listen to?" (X, 1965-66) Is it, "'Spare yet this barren stock'" because he might eventually bring forth fruit? Is it, "'So poor and swift a punishment'" prevents him from having the time to redeem himself? "Nowise!" No, his friends come at him from all sides and begin to instruct him the Pope that "there's a new tribunal now/ Higher than God's,--the educated man's!" (X, 1975-76) They come forth to say that all other wrongs Guido could patiently endure, "but touch his honor!" Such, at any rate, is Arcangeli's pleading. And when that does not work, in steps "the brisk junior," cuts the knot that human and divine law have become entangled in, and

pleads for acquittal. "'Remit the death,'" he urges. "'Forgive. . .well, in the old way, if thou please.'" Allow the Count to go free because he may plead "a priest's immunity." (X, 2001) Besides, "civilization" and "the spirit of culture" require that he be pardoned. Here is a chance for the Pope to open the gates to a new golden age where "'Civilization and the Emperor/ Succeed thy Christianity and Pope.'" For, you see, the main prop of society is the "Supremacy of husband over wife." (X, 2034)

Guido's friends urge the Pope to give his own feelings play for once. Forget that you are Pope, they tell him. How can a man "whose own life winks o'er the socket edge" deal death? Here at the end of his life he should not want to upset his own chances. "'Mercy is safe and graceful,'" the educated man argues. Moreover, if Guido is executed, the Roman populace is bound to think he was executed to "screen a scandal from the Church" by trying to exonerate Caponsacchi. The Pope should not delay but bring forth his merciful decision. Make Rome happy and ring the joyful news throughout the streets.

"I will, Sirs," the Pope answers. Thus, a resolute, eighty-six-year old first servant of God has come to the end of his decision. For a voice other than the educated man's quickens his spirit. "'Quis pro Domino?/ Who is upon the Lord's side?" Guido asked this question of the Court and the Pope can only answer, "I, who write" this verdict of

guilty. (X, 2099-2101)

For Guido the "main criminal, I have no hope," the Pope says. Unless there is a sudden change in fate. Unless there is a dark flash of truth dealt out to Guido in one blow and "Guido see, one instant, and be saved." (X, 2127) The Pope however must avert his face, for he cannot follow Guido "Into that sad obscure sequestered state" where God unmakes the soul only to remake it again. He must remake it, the Pope argues, or else He made it in vain to begin with.

"Enough," the Pope concludes. He can tarry no longer.

"For I may die this very night/ And how should I dare die, this man let live?" (X, 2132-33)

10

The Pope's monologue is the most formless of all the principals' in the murder case. Whereas in the accounts of Guido, Caponsacchi and Pompilia, the structure is something already accomplished and which they now relate to somebody else, the Pope arrives at his decision subjectively and emotionally, but he does not feel it objectively. Although the Pope realizes the need to intellectually resolve his decision, and while he knows that the creative possibilities for intellectual resolution are there, he has not yet had time to give form to what he feels. Since feelings by themselves are not informed, since they are dumb, unthinking things, the Pope knows that his decision cannot have validity

for him until he places the feelings that lie behind his decision outside of himself and deliberate about them, give them form and shape, give them order and purpose and intelligence. He knows that he has got to prove to himself that his decision is not mere whim, but that it is a truth, and at this one particular time, for this one particular case, it will always be a truth.

In summoning up the various figures with whom he wishes to speak, the Pope helps to create his decision by speaking through them back to himself. The Pope is thus carrying on a conversation with himself, one part of him trying to get outside of himself so that he can look back at himself, at the conglomerate feelings and separate insights and begin building what in essence is already there.

Somewhere amidst the mixture of feelings and thoughts--all involving the Pope's total personality--the Pope knows he has the decision. It is there in the river of his imagination, flowing, dipping above and below the surface in specks and particles. It is a formless, shapeless mass; he cannot see it whole; it is a mass of whirling and shifting possibilities; the vital images he needs are separated and he must call upon his artistic shaping power to show the form behind the fact.

The other actors in this drama proceeded with their stories in an order more closely akin to a step-by-step process. They recounted their backgrounds, the marriage

arrangements, life in Arezzo, Violante's confession, Guido's treatment of Pompilia, the flight to Rome, the trial, the aftermath, the birth of the baby, the murder, and the murder trial.

The Pope, however, has a different sort of problem involved. On a literal level, he has no story to tell. Half-Rome was worried about a possibly unfaithful wife and used the murder case as a vehicle by which to send warning to his wife's presumed lover. Other Half-Rome, realizing the mundane emptiness in his own life, felt the psychological necessity of relating the murder as a romantic adventure to reaffirm for himself his own false values. Tertium Quid saw aspects in the story which might amuse his aristocratic acquaintances and thus secure for him a better position in upper-class Roman society. Caponsacchi has been asked by the judges to appear as a friend of the Court and tell his story again, and he consents to appear, not for his own sake, but for theirs. Pompilia feels a need to establish the truth and tells her story in order to show the truth as she knows it. Arcangeli and Bottini find the case professionally interesting and use it as a means to raise their stature in the legal profession. Guido tells his story twice, and in both instances he is pleading for his life; because it is his life which is at stake, we might call Guido's second monologue the most deliberately dramatic in the poem. (Browning speaks to us in the first and last monologues

because he feels a need to show us "pure crude fact" mixed with a fancy which becomes "one fact the more." Thus in the end, he shows us a book which means "beyond the facts," the truth beyond any particular person's perception of it, beyond any facts that have recorded it.)

The Pope's position is somewhat analogous to Browning's, but if we consider only the Pope's relationship to the rest of the principals, we discover that the Pope is the only person who has no story to tell and no "personal" reason to tell it. It is for this reason that the Pope is not telling a story but slowly creating a decision. It is for this reason that the Pope seems busy gathering the specks and particles of the elusive truths as they dance around him, rather than going piece by piece through the documents. This latter procedure the Pope has already completed. He has already made his orderly, legalized, intellectualized investigation.

He is sad, he is perplexed; he is old and sick at heart; he has sat up in his close, bare room in the Basilica, above the gossip of this half of Rome, that half of Rome, and that curious synthesis which makes up Rome's third and different part; he has had very little to do with the trial; suddenly every part of it is placed before him.

He needs talk to nobody; and yet he talks with so many in order to get back to himself. He knows that he is the only person to whom he can talk. Nobody can "make"

his decision for him, not even God. He knows that as God's first servant, he has an obligation not only to God, but to himself. He realizes that only "better than the best will serve." How paint, how draw, how shape and round that which he knows is there, waiting for his brush to be applied?

His decision is like a long road. We get on it when he does and he begins to lay down his road as he travels on it. It is a road that goes through the speeches of all his listeners and then comes back around into his own heart and mind; it is a road--since he also talks to God--that goes to Heaven. But Heaven is not his immediate goal. His immediate goal is here on earth; there is a certain anxiety within him as he moves and builds his road because he feels there is a possibility he will die before he finishes; thus it is a road built in a day. The road is a circle; it begins and ends within himself. It is shaped like a ring. It is the sun, the blinking, pounding white heat of truth hammered into man's reality.

The Pope knows about truth. It is like a thing you can stretch out and put your finger through and then it encircles you all about. Yet you cannot put it down; it is always growing and evolving and yet there is a hard core at the center of it which, like Pompilia, will never change. There is a kind of dazzling whiteness, too brilliant sometimes for man's eyes, and we have to take the light in proportion as we are able to receive it without being blinded. This is the reason the Pope's road cannot stay in Heaven; it

must find the light "inside the sun" like Caponsacchi did, and bring it back to us so we can use that light to rise by.

11

It is because of his imaginative abilities that the Pope can find Guido "reprobate." What made Guido different? Did he face so many disadvantages that he was forced into evil? He had the same appetite for life as the rest of us, but he began to use his eyes to search "outside the grate." (X, 418) He had no compunctions in permitting his greed full exercise. He apparently always used the Church as a screen to protect him. His whole family was indeed no different.

Yet he had the external attributes which should have caused him to begin life well. In spite of this, his whole soul is blackness for he believed in "just the vile of life." (X, 511) Can we call his instincts "truth" just as we call our own and Caponsacchi's and Pompilia's. All the disguises he wore, all the fantastic lies that he told, are they not the result of a truth about evil which he feels as deeply as we feel our truths about goodness? Most people are akin to Guido to the degree that they offer good words but the results are bad deeds. It is an "habitual creed" with the world.

But the Pope is blocked from explaining Guido's blackness. He accepts it and he knows it is a fact, but he is aware that he must account for it in other ways, for it is a link in the chain of vital images that he must gather

and join together to show the sense of his decision--a decision that is actually a moral judgment that he shapes and creates himself.

Guido's marriage helps to explain him because there he acted in diammetrical opposition to all the reasons one might have for marriage. It was not just a simple marriage of convenience. From the first Guido apparently saw in it an opportunity to extend some of the blackness about himself out into the world's light. What astonishes the Pope is that "Not one permissible impulse moves the man!" (X, 536) Even before he married he had evidently formulated a plan whereby he could possess everything the Comparini owned, break the back of Pompilia at the same time, and drive them all out into the sea.

Now, the Pope asks, what kind of instinct is this? It is just as base as Pompilia's is high. It seems to move according to its own laws and has its own justification. He would lie, rob, even murder; he had not the slightest qualm about any of it.

The love letters are an obvious forgery and just as they could not possibly have been written by Pompilia precisely because of her instincts, just so they had to be written by Guido because of his. As for Pompilia and Caponsacchi, once they were brought together, the Pope is aware of the danger for both of them. There is no question that they were drawn toward each other. Who could doubt

that Caponsacchi was tempted? Both were passionate beings, and there was a possibility there for evil as there was for good. But they transformed a mundane scene by a window into the symbols they needed to inspire them on to their goal. They turned the window where she stood into a shrine. Caponsacchi and Pompilia had a "new noble nature" and when "Husband, wife and priest meet face to face," at the inn, which truth wins out? Guido's "torchlight treachery" is no match for Caponsacchi's "education to truth."

The Pope explains Guido's oversight in not securing the necessary ticket to get out of Rome as being the "Touch of the fool in Guido the astute!" It was an obstacle that was "Too vulgar, too absurdly plain i' the path." (X, 812) He did not see the need to remove it. It was an oversight so characteristic of the world in which Guido lived; the fact that he would not be able to bribe the guard never occurred to Guido; he took such corruption for granted. The other characters who hover around the fire in Guido's cave--men like his two brothers, the Governor and the Archbishop, the four hirelings--all seem to have thrived in the same manner. The sickness of the world had become part of its structure; without it, society could not operate. How was it possible that among this darkness and disease, a stray "beauty-beam" of light suddenly appeared, penetrating that darkness, searching for a way to the sky? The Pope knows he cannot explain this; he accepts it because it is there;

ultimately, he accepts it on faith.

12

Pompilia is dressed in "the old clean linen garb." In spite of everything she had the will to believe. She clung to her faith at a time when the world gave her every cause to leave it. The Pope sees that she created something of her own within herself that was independent of people, society and the world.

The Pope is aware, too, that the people who have been carefully trained in the Church have failed in his own time. Yet here is a "seed planted by chance" which springs up on the side of the road without benefit of the Church's careful guardianship. Right to the last, she was faithful to what she understood to be right, according to her ability to understand it. And each time, that which she was faithful to forsook her--parents, husband, Church--and instead of falling back, she rose "from law to law,/ The old to the new." She evolved her own reality in a step-by-step process. She did not need them because she had the will to believe in herself and her faith. This was more real to her than anything she saw in the external world. It was her desire to defend "That trust of trusts" which God had laid on her that enabled her to place her reality squarely against the world's.

Caponsacchi, too, is placed not so very far from

Pompilia. Although the Pope is aware of Caponsacchi's ulterior motives in becoming involved with her, those motives disappeared and he finds the inspiration to act from her and what she symbolized for him, rather than from the Church, or from his Summa, or from the world. Here again, those men of the Church and of the nobility who were trained to give service failed and a society priest suddenly sprang forth the hero. The Pope is hard-pressed to reconcile this seeming paradox. The Pope regards Caponsacchi as a man who has helped to shape a world of his own and has defiantly asserted it in the face of the world he has known. That world is the ambivalent, complacent, corrupt world of Roman society which insists that there is both good and bad in everything.

But, the Pope declares, we cannot have both the white and the black. Here, it is apparent that the Pope has found another segment of his road, another link in his chain. Those men who have been trained in the Church have accepted both black and white. But Caponsacchi realized that "Life's business is just the terrible choice." (X, 1237) Guido, too, recognized this. It is in the choice, then, wherein part of one's true reality lies. Guido's commitment to the black is final and complete. Yet the black, though it is a truth of a sort because it is a fact in the world, is nevertheless a terrible falsehood. We know this when we see that, in

the disease, the corruption, the blackness, the white heat of the real truth rises, grows and unfolds like a flower, spreading and reaching for the light.

13

Human beings have said that man is fallible. God made man perfect, but took away that perfection and told man that henceforth this life on earth is "a training and a passage" for the true reality in heaven. Pompilia never once doubted this, and Caponsacchi saw it instantly when it confronted him. God required man to strive to perfect himself, since he no longer could be perfect. In order to strive for this, man is necessarily bound to reach for and create it--at least in part, for perfection is not there waiting for him on earth, nor is it an entity that he may find somewhere in what the Pope calls "The absolute immensity." This immensity is too blinding for man's vision and is not accessible to him anyway while he is on earth.

The Pope recognizes the difficulty in finding truth in the "human sphere" and he realizes that his way of finding it is analogous to the way of Pompilia and Caponsacchi. Just as they know, so too does he know. The problem is, if man is fallible, then how does the Pope know he knows? His eyes, he tells us, have grown sharp by use. That is, he has exercised his creative abilities for a long while. Yet he denies that he has any "special touch" and he thinks that all men have this ability if they would only use it.

if they would only "give better than the best."

The Pope characterizes his own creative process as a combination of "hard work and good will." It is not a matter of high intelligence; it does not require intellection. Joined with this is a "habitude that gives a blind man sight." That is, the Pope knows that his commitment is complete and that he has increased his abilities by his habitual exercise of them. He has been operating within this framework so long that he is like a blind man who develops an unusual sensitivity to things. The Pope claims just this kind of "poetic license." He has a feel for the truth at the end of his fingertips.

His fallibility stems from his imperfection. The source of his imperfection is God. The source of his "poor spark" of light is also God. He must exercise the latter in order to reach beyond the former. It is possible that he has misinterpreted heaven's message, but if that is so, how has he come to know the things he knows? The Pope draws an analogy between the mind of man and a convex glass that curves outwardly and traps those scattered particles that it is able to gather out of the sky's "absolute immensity." These particles are united in heaven, and man reunites those which he traps in his mind by exercising his creative abilities.

The Pope believes we have no reason to live unless we love, but that we cannot love unless we know. That is,

we must see the relationship between our own idea of wholeness and the "absolute immensity" of God. When those aspects of the absolute which we see reunite in our minds, it is "our heaven on earth,/ Our known unknown." (X, 1313-14) It is a "whole proportioned to our sense." Each mode of life takes its proper place in God's plan; whether "Angel or Insect," it is as "Thous framedst things." (X, 1331) Thus, God has appointed the Pope to a particular place. The fact that this is all taking place on this particular planet, the fact that he has the duty he has, all come from an operation outside the sphere of man. "Incomprehensibly the choice is Thine!" (X, 1345) the Pope says.

Although man has strength and intelligence he does not always have goodness or love. The Pope sees an analogy between the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of Pompilia. Each supplies that which the world lacks but needs in order to fulfill itself--"love without a limit." The murder story, like the story of Christ, discloses a love that is "Unlimited in its self-sacrifice." But this is not enough to answer the Pope's question about fallibility. Something is beyond the tale. The Pope admits that here he must feel what he cannot see, yet he still has faith. The dread machinery of sin and sorrow which God has set in the world--the blackness of the Guidos, the yellow that passes for white of churchmen like Paolo--are used to bring out the moral qualities of man.

Out of evil, out of pain and suffering, we create for ourselves the insight that tells us that one must love and be loved in return. In this way man becomes simultaneously creative and self-sacrificing. That is, we help to create the love we have for God and man, and we see the necessity of sacrificing ourselves in order to bring that love to fulfillment.

Man is on probation; he creates his own moral world, by finding and re-creating God's truth here on earth. Man creates it according to his own proportion, then expands and enlarges his creation by exercising his moral sense; his reality grows toward God's.

The Pope cannot help but despair over the failures of the Church. The representatives of the Church are apparently learning from their teaching the opposite from that for which the teaching was intended. The Pope knows that the Church teaches that love and faith are supposed to spring from authoritative sources. But here is a case where the sources of love and faith spring from those who have not been designated to bring them. Caponsacchi is like a man "inside the sun." That is, Caponsacchi no longer so much receives the light of truth as he himself gives it off so others can see. No, the Church and all its representatives must face the truth. And the truth is that either they must give "better than the best, or nothing serves!" (X, 1579)

The Pope is heartsick that this is all he has to show

to God for his efforts. Apparently people can gain the truth just as easily by the "old smelting-process" used years ago as they can by the complex, institutionalized machinery that the Church now offers. He asks himself if this does not lead us to doubt God because we have been beguiled into wondering where the right path is that one takes to find the right way to truth. But the Pope feels that this is an irrelevant question. There is a central truth--God--which he believes in. The only things the Pope cannot believe in are those things that he outlives. How can I know it is dead if I cannot outlive it, he asks? As long as it outlives him, it has the edge on him. This is why the Pope holds to his faith. He cannot outlive his own faith.

Here is a murder case which partakes of the deepest night. But Pompilia proves what the Pope believes--that day will always succeed the deepest night. If light burned once, then there exists the possibility it will burn again. It is his faith in the possibility that is his highest reality. The Pope believes that by exercising our own creative abilities we can turn that possibility into a reality for ourselves through love and self-sacrifice. He could be wrong and someone might someday be making pronouncements over the ashes of his soul, but at least he never said it himself while he was alive, because there was always the possibility.

The Pope sees the possibility as real because by self-

sacrificing love we put that possibility into action and it becomes a living reality. Thus the challenge becomes, can we see that this possibility is real?[1]

But does not that give an inherent weakness to faith, one might ask? Certainly, for faith is inevitably bound up in weakness, since it deals with the unknown which we must fear yet face. We are all weak in our faith, hence the need we feel to help others. We sacrifice ourselves because we know that others need the same help we need. The Pope calls this "a weakness made strength." The Pope sees that this is a re-creation of an old truth. Our faith with its weakness is the other side of God's absolute faith in Himself. Our faith stems from the laws that God put forth, but it is a "thing made new" by us.

With such a faith, the Pope does not fear at all, for he has ample light. His apprehension is that earth has created its own false light. There is no self-sacrifice possible because the thing we seek is already here; thus there is no need for the faith that is a possibility. People are no longer seeking possibilities but probabilities. We have developed a "torpor of assurance" about mankind. Incredibly enough, we no longer doubt. People now do not see that without doubt there can be no faith. We must doubt in order to rise above doubt by faith. This is the only way we know

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[1]Compare Guido's argument, which is the exact reverse of the Pope's. Guido says if he is wrong about not believing in God and goodness he has had his life, whatever he loses. If he is right, he has got the single good there was to gain. (XI, 727-29)

what cannot be known. We must be confronted by the "formidable danger." Even now in his own time there must be some truth "Unrecognized yet, but perceptible," that will help us discover the real light.

In his own time, man has developed his own picture of God; it is false because it is man's God. What we want is God's God; that is, God puts an idea of Himself in man's mind and man must seek to recognize it.

The Pope feels whispers of this attitude coming in the future. He is almost at the end of his life, and he is living at the end of a century. He feels that a corrupt and dying age has almost run its course. The mask that all have been wearing is now being impatiently nudged and pushed off the stage by a new "anti-mask." This anti-mask is the first experimentalist in what the Pope sees as a new order of things. He receives no inspiration from the so-called authoritative sources of love and faith. "His own mere impulse guides the man." (X, 1913) But that impulse, the Pope knows, embodies a complex structuring of the truths of reality that Caponsacchi has created himself out of his own faith in the possibility.

Thus the Pope rejects the arguments of Guido's friends. He rejects and scorns that "new tribunal" which is "Higher than God's,--the educated man's!" (X, 1975-76) He rejects all arguments of "civilization" and the "spirit of culture." He knows there is a new age, but it is not the

"golden age" of "Civilization and the Emperor," where the strength of society lays in the husband's supremacy over the wife.

The Pope's decision itself is first a possibility. The Pope sees that possibility and by means of the faith he has in himself, he transforms that possibility into a reality. We can follow his creative processes.

He knows that he knows. This is the first thing.

He says he has so much faculty to judge. God gave him no more.

He has done "better than the best" with what God has given him (for nothing else will serve).

Beyond this, he has his faith that what he has done is the best there can be; thus he knows through faith what it is not possible to know.

This faith is a faith--filled with doubt and rising beyond doubt--in his own judgment.

More than this, he has faith that even if someday his judgment proves to be wrong, it is yet right because he acted in good faith.

He knows that just as God embodied Pompilia with that "trust of trusts"--to bring forth life--so too God has given him a trust as the head of His Church.

The Pope accepts this trust on faith. Thus he judges on faith--accompanied by hard work, good will and an eye grown sharp by practice--and if his judgment is

wrong, it is wrong in good faith. This is the "better than the best" that he can do.

But he knows he is right.

He doubt his judgment. But he never once doubts his decision.

CHAPTER XVI

GUIDO IN PRISON

1

He asks for help. He is innocent, "Innocent as a babe, as Mary's own." (XI, 30) Anybody in his situation would have done what he did. "All honest Rome approved my part." (XI, 39) Anybody who has had wives, sisters, daughters will know what he means.

His lawyers told him even if the Court found him guilty he could always plead benefit of clergy. But the Pope had us all fooled, he says, He is the same hypocrite we all are. He was not "the angel in man's likeness." (XI, 60) "He help?/ He pardon? Here's his mind and message--death,/ Thank the good Pope!" (XI, 61-62) Is the Pope not supposed to believe in mercy, to live and let live? Is this not what he stands for? The Pope knows what his decision means, "and sets me rolling all the same!" (XI, 78)

"Because I play some prank my grandsire played," (XI, 111) here I am, in prison waiting to go to my own execution. He looks askance at his two auditors--the two priests who have come to take his confession. Surely they must be here for another purpose, perhaps to tell him that

he will live yet another day. Will they not say something? He looks at them anxiously, trying to gauge their thoughts behind their blank faces. "Will you have the naked truth?" he asks loudly. The Pope decided, being old and sick of his own life, that he would snuff out mine at the same time. "Sir Abate,/ Can you do nothing?" (XI, 86-87) He looks at them, searches their faces. What are they thinking? What message do they bring?

He calls his two confessors his friends. You know me, he tells them. We are all from the same class. You went into the Church, I stayed as head of my house. "Friends, we used to frisk," (XI, 87) at one time earlier in our lives. Now there is a slash, a "cut across our good companionship" that was so gay when we were all young. He is like them, he says; we're different from others, because we were put into a particular path--"nobles born and bred." (XI, 93) Each of our escutcheons is full "Of old achievement and impunity." (XI, 94) Yes, being nobles, with their rich heritage and their great achievements, they enjoy and have earned a certain kind of impunity. They had no care in those days, riding across the green, prancing through the meadows. The sun saluted, the morning laughed. One time his grandfather pulled up his rein, slipped out of his saddle and stabbed a "knave" who dared to jeer at him. Then he got back on his horse and went on with the "cavalcade." (XI, 106) Now, because he plays the same game his grandfather played, he

suddenly finds himself in prison, convicted of murder! It is a new trap with a novel spring""just set/ By the good old Pope." (XI, 114-15)

In fact, his trap is the first one and he is the first prize. "Warn me? Why?" Did anybody tell him that the rules of the game had been changed? He can see that he is being used as an example, as a warning to other members of his class. The Pope is now making the law plain past any mistake. The prank, the jest, the joke, now has death as its penalty. Of course, the Pope is not fooling him; they both know that in the kind of society in which they live, it has always been regarded as a prank.

Pope the Fifth, or "Pope the Five Hundredth..what do I know or care?" (X, 121) So a dagger was whipped out, what does it matter? Nobles have always had privilege. And when they were out riding or gaming or gambling, "Something of a sudden jerks at somebody--/ A dagger is out, flashing cut and thrust," (XI, 110-11) and blood flows; it is all part of the game and they all played it. Why is he being punished for it now?

Thus twelve hours from now and he must try his body and soul upon the virtue of the Pope's brand new "engine," his new rule. "I'm the first!" He knows that for certain; the guillotine awaits him; it is reserved for the nobility. He wants to tell them about the guillotine because he has seen it and hates it.

In fact, he will talk about anything. "Let me talk," he tells them, "Or leave me at your pleasure." But he has to talk, to keep himself busy. "Talk I must," he says. What have they come there for anyway except to lure him into talk? Perhaps, he says hopefully, they have something else to disclose, some better news? But for this question he receives only silence. All right, "Use your ears,/ I use my tongue." But how they will talk tonight at their supper when all their guests jump and clamor for the news and say "'Welcome his Eminence who shrived the wretch!/ Now we shall have the Abate's story!" (XI, 141-42)

2

Guido knows. No one is fooling him. He tells how he became acquainted with the guillotime--the night he was a chance witness at the execution of a certain peasant named Felice. Felice had made the mistake of speaking improperly to a duke and then striking him in the face because the duke had kidnapped and raped his sister. Therefore, he was sent to the block. It was the expected thing, the usual way in Rome. Later that night the Duke threw a party and passed around an obscene picture of the sister. Everyone laughed at the jest.

But suddenly, Guido says in mock perplexity, times are different. There is another Pope now. "I do the Duke's deed," but I get Felice's punishment. Riddle me that! (XI, 277) Guido does not like the phrase, "'I lose my head.'" This is

for louts and clouts like Felice. "How euphemistic! Lose what? Lose your ring,/ Your snuff-box, tablets, kerchief!--but, your head?" (XI, 280-81) Guido learned all he had to know as a nobleman at an early age. And it was useful knowledge in those days "To know the way a head is set on neck," (XI, 284) and to know what could cause one to lose it. It certainly was not from pranks!

But the sage says there is not much pain when the steel blade drops on your neck. "Who told him?" Guido wants to know. "Not Felice's ghost, I think!" This is not the way of Mother Nature, for our head to fall off our body. She would much rather have the cord worn away by living to a ripe old age. One dies naturally and well when Nature is behind it. But when the process is carried out by Art, Art with its mighty engine, the guillotine, then Nature is crushed out.

And anyhow why must it be? It would be different if all men were good. But men are not good, at least not good like Peter. And if he asked Peter, "'Petrus, quo vadis?'" Peter's answer would doubtless be "'To free the prisoner and forgive his fault.'" (XI, 327-28) Why cannot Innocent, the good Pope, who has succeeded to Peter's place, "think Peter's thought, speak Peter's speech!" (XI, 333) Why, Guido asserts, "I say, he is bound to it: friends, how say you?" (XI, 332) Again the two priests give him no answer.

Is the new gospel of Innocent now to be Law and not

love? Guido thought the Pope believed in love, not law--in mercy rather than justice so much. "Christ's maxim is--one soul outweighs the world!/ Respite me, save a soul, then, curse the world!" (XI, 359-60) He tells his confessors that he is merely defending himself and that he has "the best o' the battle." (XI, 390) The facts are on his side. At least half of Rome approves of what he did, and all Rome asks for his acquittal. But the Pope does not do what all Rome wants him to do. What is the matter with this "Vicar of the Lord,/ Shepherd o' the flock?" All he can do is turn his staff, use the point, "And thrust the shuddering sheep he calls a wolf,/ Back and down, down and down to where hell gapes!" (XI, 405-06)

The Pope calls him guilty for the sake of a whim. Perhaps Guido should confess that he deserves his fate and thus keep up the jest and continue the lie until the end. But he will "stick to the truth," even to his last breath, the truth that he is "an innocent and murdered man." (XI, 418-19) And perhaps a rumor might start abroad in Rome that the Pope killed an innocent man. "Therefore," he tells the priests, "to suppress such talk/ You two come here, entreat I tell you lies," (XI, 431-32) and end my life the "edifying way." But, Guido tells them positively, "I end,/ Telling the truth! Your self-styled shepherd thieves!" (XI, 433-34) Yes, the Pope is a thief. And thieves hate wolves, because wolves damage what the thief has stolen. There is no reason

why the wolf should compliment the thief by giving him the title of "shepherd," or why the wolf should, without spite, lick the prong that turns him on the spit. "Eh,/ Cardinal? My Abate, scarcely thus!" (XI, 441-42)

Guido looks at them and suddenly realizes what he has done. Has he accidentally admitted that under his own sheepskin he is a wolf? All right then, "There, let my sheepskin-garb, a curse on 't, go--/ Leave my teeth free if I must show my shag!" (XI, 443-44) Suddenly it is all over. He undergoes his transformation in front of them. He drops all his disguises; his fangs show; his snarl is loud and terrifying. "Repent?" he shouts at them. "What good shall follow?" (XI, 445) Is he going to be any happier during the last twelve hours of his life when at the thirteenth his head rolls down the slide? Or is it the happiness of an after-life? Should he repent to save his soul? But that would be a lie. Only truth can save him. So, "Hear the truth, you, whatever you style yourselves,/ Civilization and society!" (XI, 462-63) he shouts at not only them but at all humanity. Come on, he screams defiantly, I will fight with all the world. It is obvious that the priests intend to do their worst with him. It is in their eyes. "You dare no more than death,/ And mean no less," he says. (XI, 469-70) Why should they give him any respite? I knew what I was doing, he tells them. "I knew that if I chose sin certain sins," and satiated my lust in certain ways that were proscribed to me, "I should

find you in the path." (XI, 479-81) Thus, when we cross blades, I find you the better swordsman. But you want more, it seems. You want repentance too. Law attempted to join in this adventure, but Law was not enough or else you two would not be here. "Did not the Trial show things plain enough?" (XI, 511) Were you not satisfied with its results? "'Ah,'" you say, "'but a word of the man's very self/ Would somehow put the keystone in its place,'" (XI, 512-13) and crown the rightness of the proceedings.

All right, Guido flings at them. Here it is. "Take the word you want!" (XI, 514)

3

Defiantly, from the darkness of his wolf's cave, Guido peels off layer after layer of his evil nature and slowly reveals the bottomless depths of his depravity. The setting is visually appropriate: he is in his damp cell, awaiting execution, standing in the midst of light and darkness. The two priests are there, grimly silent; he looks hopefully at them for some word, for a smile to tell him they are jesting, that he has been pardoned all along; he casts about for something, anything, that will perhaps give him some respite, some delay, some postponement.

He hints at what he will later develop artistically--that he was born and bred to follow a certain path. Based on the way he was raised, on the "way of the world," he murdered

in good faith. It amazes him that he must pay for his crime with his life. Nobody else has ever done so before him. He knows, and the priests know, and he knows the Pope knows, that he is the first to be tried under this new law. They are not fooling anybody. Everyone knows that under the old law rank and privilege would have been exempted. The simple fact is, the nobility has always had privilege. Essentially, as Guido sees it, he is being robbed of this basic right. He inherited the right, has always taken it for granted. He murdered on the assumption that the right was still his. In the burgess and pleb class, Guido's crime would indeed be murder. But on Guido's level, Law winks and calls it a prank, a jest--just some knights out playing around; some peasant gets hurt in jest and there is perhaps a mild penalty. The knight gets a slap on the wrist; Law occasionally gets irritated because the knight is foolish enough to get caught in his pecadilloes, but the whole thing is the result of his freedom. We must give the knight room in which to ride "up hill and down dale."

Why is there now a new law? What is its justification? He had no warning that the new law was in effect; none told him that it now no longer was a game but the real thing. But now, here in the darkness of the prison, he loses more and more control of the "truth" and the "innocence" that he presented to the world during his trial. All the careful artistry that he had wrought when he stood before the judges

in their private chambers is now obviously of no use to him. His false portrait of himself has failed. He has no need any longer to assume the disguise. He keeps searching for some last hope in the expression of the two men of the Church who have come to shrive him. He cannot afford to stop talking. If he does, his whole world will crumble. He must try to salvage something; his false portrait of himself he knows he must cast off. He keeps searching about, looking for some new scheme; surely he will not have to reveal what he is <u>really</u> like; he is obviously stalling for time; it is almost as if he knows he must keep talking for once he stops talking he stops living. He cannot really afford to let anyone else speak unless they have the right message. He is in a state of numbness, yet there is a growing feeling of panic inside him.

In casting about for a solution, he says it would be different if all men were good. But, he argues, we are not good. We are, in fact, basically bad. He points out that the Pope is supposed to demonstrate mercy and love. He forgives our badness; he knows this is the way we are. He is a shepherd; we are his sheep. In Guido's case, the Shepherd calls him a Wolf and will not help.

He admits that he is a wolf; it is a psychological, as well as an artistic, necessity for him to do so now. Underneath his sheep's clothing--the false art that we saw earlier--lies the true Guido, and there also lies his true

art--an art without order or meaning; it is an undisciplined art, a kind of black magic; this time there is no wand, no golden key, no rabbits out of hats; now he knows the game is up with him. His justification must come from the depths of the wolf's lair. This is where he will apply his true art; there will be no more facades, no more references to sheep and flocks, no more pictures of family pride or impoverished nobility.

There is a truth about me, he says defiantly. Yes, there is. He knows it, feels it with all the ugliness inside himself. Here is where his deepest feelings reside, down in the dark lair inside himself. Just as Pompilia and Caponsacchi knew their deepest feelings were the real ones, so, too, does Guido. And the deepest part of him knows completely and finally that there is absolutely no repentance inside him. Repentance is impossible. If there were some practical end to be gained--to save his life even if it meant life imprisonment--then all right, he would put his sheep's clothing on again and repent easily enough. But as for the **truth** of repentance, that is not so, and cannot be.

All the people who call themselves civilization and society--there is no truth where they are. It is all a facade. Society cannot afford to admit its true motivations or it would be forced to admit too many things about itself. And he will fight them all. He is not afraid of them. He admits that he knew what he was doing all along, and he got

caught, so he must now pay the penalty. But he will never repent. The two priests have come because they know, and he knows they know, that the legal trial did not really solve anything. They are not satisfied. They want to know his very self; they know there is something much more than what the trial disclosed. Law is just another facade used by society for convenience. They want to get behind that facade, to make certain that the Pope has guessed right.

All right, Guido will give them the word they want; he will tell them what they have come to hear; but when he tells the truth about himself, he wants them to know that he is also telling the truth about them, about the Pope, about everybody. For behind what we style civilization and society lie all of us, snarling and flashing in our wolf's lair.

Now Guido is obliged to try to justify to himself his real personality and his real world. He used his artistry to show himself as a hero and servant of God. Now he has to remove that order, and we begin to see that there is no other ordering process he can use to keep himself and his world integrated. He attempts to give shape and substance to his wolf's lair, but his artistry cannot give that reality a unity. Nor can his creative abilities unify his own personality, for Guido's destructive values are tearing that personality apart. Guido tries overwhelmingly to crush the truth and assert his own powerful, creative evil. But his own myth destroys him.

CHAPTER XVII

UNSHAPELY THINGS

1

"Then take the word you want!" (XI, 514)

With that defiant assertion, Guido brings the face of his darkness out into the light for all the world to see.

You see, he tells them, long ago, when societies were first established and "things began,/ All the world made agreement." (XI, 515-16) They agreed that certain forms of behavior gave off both pleasure and profit. But sometimes such pleasures were "extra-legal" and not always allowed to be pursued. For example, "You must not kill the man whose death would please/ And profit you, unless his life stop yours,/ Plainly." (XI, 519-20) It came to be that you had to get the thing you wanted by a "public course" such as law. Private bloodshed, which had been used in earlier, more primitive civilizations, was now no longer allowed.

Now, Guido says, we renounced this kind of license and conformed to the law. Whoever breaks the law and helps himself to that pleasure and profit which is more than his just due must pay the price and receive "pain beyond his share." (XI, 528) For whatever else we think, "pleasure is

the sole good in the world." And always, one's pleasure causes someone else pain. Thus we have decided to let law watch over everyone.

Of course, this is what we say. We call anything wicked that gives too much joy. And then, when someone does get too much joy, we are envious and punish him. We "nickname" it punishment, but we are acting out of envy. It is all "quite right!" because it is the way "the world goes round"; (XI, 524) it is what human beings need to psychologically justify their actions--to each other and to themselves.

Now I was no different from others, Guido tells them. In my time I have found it to my advantage also to observe the law and support crime's penalty. Like others, Guido had no desire to risk his life by infringing upon the law, but now that he has done it, he will pay the price. Repentance, however, is out of the question. He is not sorry for "law's breach" but for his "blunderer's-ineptitude." (XI, 546-47)

In the first place, there is nothing to repent for. Is he at fault because he does not recognize that above man's law, there is God's law, which "you Christians recognize?" Further, in the second place, there is no one to repent to. He cannot repent to society since he knows about the pact all have agreed upon; he cannot repent to a God he cannot see. "Here stands the devil," he says blatantly, referring to himself; now why don't you Christians exorcise me? Guido maintains that if there ever was such a faith as Christianity,

it is "dead of age now, ludicrously dead." (XI, 561) Christianity itself has become a mask like everything else.

Let us be honest, he says, "Off with it!" (XI, 609) "Look in your heart," he sneers at them. Though faith is gone, is it not obvious that "Unbelief still might work the wires and move/ Man the machine, to play a faithful part." (XI, 612-13) After all, "Why should things change because men disbelieve?" They are still pretending that they believe. Thus the wires and the machinery are outwardly the same. But wait. Supposing he waves his wand and makes the false the true? Supposing true Christianity did suddenly come into being? What would happen? Why it would be an "explosion." You would see "how the fragments fly/ Of what was surface, mask and make-believe." (XI, 624-25) All Rome would be in a turmoil. People would be serving Christ instead of themselves. "Why," Guido laughs, "for your life, you dare not tell your friend/ 'You lie, and I admonish you for Christ!'" (XI, 681) You would only do that if you were a true believer.

Guido studies his two listeners. You raise your brows, he says, but "you know I speak the truth." (XI, 695) We all recognize pleasure and we all recognize pain. We are not going to go around sacrificing ourselves in pain when the pleasure is there. We are not going to sacrifice ourselves for anything. Perhaps there are fifty or so monks and nuns who are true believers and "prove their faith a fact." But fifty times that number "squeak/ And gibber in the

madhouse--firm of faith." (XI, 702-03) One cannot have that kind of faith in our particular world. Because they have gone mad, "Does that prove all the world outside insane?" (XI, 706) Do fifty of these "miracle-mongers" match the millions of the rest of us who act on the "frank faithless principle" that we are "Born-baptized-and-bred Christian atheists?" (XI, 708-09) And does this not give each of us as much right to judge as you?

Now I would have my faith, Guido tells them, except for "a spice of doubt." Christianity is not a sure thing and the risk is too rash. For me, he says, it is "double or quits," all or nothing. Anything in between only gets his contempt, and doubtless God's also, he adds. That is the difficulty with Christianity. It is an in-between sort of thing. No, Guido says, he will take his pleasure "whatever pain it cause the present world." (XI, 727) If it turns out that he is wrong, well, he has had his life, whatever he loses. If I am right, he argues, "I've got the single good there was to gain." (XI, 729) It is thus that he takes his stand: "Entire faith or else complete unbelief." (XI, 730) Guido's commitment is as complete as is Pompilia's and Caponsacchi's.

Faith is no good when misfortune and misery begin to plague one's life. "Who holds to faith whenever rain begins?" he asks. (XI, 744) Why, people "laugh frankly in the face of faith/ And take the natural course." (XI, 750-51) "Down

they all drop to my low level," he says, because they are all like me. Faith is not natural to any of us and the very priests whom he is talking to have always cried "Amen" to his creed. The primary basis of his creed is "Get pleasure, 'scape pain,--give your preference/ To the immediate good, for time is brief/ And death ends good and ill and everything." (XI, 768-70) What are the implications of such a creed? "What's got is gained, what's gained soon is gained twice,/ And,--inasmuch as faith gains most,--feign faith!" (XI, 771-72)

Well, "brother-like," we all passed this word around, Guido says. We recognized it as the mask we had to put on. And now, suddenly the game is over and these same priests who told him it was a jest have now become grave and sober. I used the old license granted to noblemen and no more "dreamed of harm...than snow in harvest." (XI, 780-81) I find you very same people "Making me Rome's example," for the "general good," even though we have all got drunk on the same wine. "Why my sin, drunkards?" Guido asks. "Where have I abused/ Liberty, scandalized you all so much?" (XI, 791-92)

You see, Guido explains to them, if the Church had said this present life is sin and that we all should seek our rewards in heaven then--having warned me, and not with lies but with deeds--that would have been fair. He could have taken one course or the other, played wolf or joined the

sheep's fold. But the Church bade him to put on the disguise of sheep's clothing over the wolf's skin. In that way, he says, he could "suck blood" and hide the noise by mimicking the bleat of a lamb. And now, Guido says fiercely, "Because I smack my tongue too loud for once./ Drop baaing, here's the village up in arms!" (XI, 828-29)

The first story which he told the Court he devised because of its plausibility. It is the way everybody else has always done, he argues. In order to justify a thing, all one has to do is to cover it with the pretense of plausibility. Even the Church does it: "'Saint Somebody-or-other raised the dead:'/ Did he? How do you come to know as much?" (XI, 866-67) Why, there is no need to know it since the story is plausible and vouched for by a martyrologist. After all, "'why should good men sup on cheese and leeks,/ On such a saint's day, if there were no saint?'" (XI, 871-72) Well, Guido says, "I praise the wisdom of these fools, and straight/ Tell them my story--'plausible, but false!'" (XI, 872-73) This is what the judges tell him. Now, Guido asks, what kind of an answer is that? Certainly my story is false. We all knew that from the beginning. Who said anything about its truth or falseness? All I was required to do was to make it sound plausible. As to whether or not it is false--an irrelevant question to begin with--what else could a story be "That runs--a young wife tired of an old spouse,/ Found a priest whom she fled away with." (XI, 875-76) Here

is the very essence of disbelief; the story is too pat to be true. But while no one point in the tale was strictly true, "There's that in the tale might seem like truth," (XI, 883) to a wretched husband, who could not see clearly because of his jealous rage.

But his story--though plausible--was not enough, and time is running out. "What hour is fleeting now?" Guido asks anxiously, aware that each minute he talks gets him closer to his death. He wonders what death will bring. He would ask God a question. Am I to be wiped out? Will you "smear/ This soul from all Thy white of things?" (XI, 936-37) If I am "one huge and sheer mistake,--whose fault?/ Not mine at least, who did not make myself!" (XI, 938-39) What else can he cry out in his rage, since he is "Unable to repent one particle/ O' the past?" His rage is also directed at all the instruments of society who have put on a mask over their mask and now condemn him. The situation requires a man of sober sense to analyze it--not the priests who only "scrape the surface." He wants a cool logical mind that would ask, "before it finishes with a dog,/ Who taught the dog that trick you hang him for?" (XI, 949-50) He reminds the priests that they both persist in calling his act a crime. But the wise man digging beneath the surface would see that it was a blunder. "At the worst, I stood in doubt/ On cross-road, took one path of many paths." (XI, 953-54) The path he took, as they can all see in retrospect, was the

wrong one. But he can prove, by taking them back over the crime, that no one could have warned him that he was on the wrong track. "Advise me," he says, as I go back over the story, "when I take the first false step!" (XI, 960)

2

She had "milk for blood"--this thirteen-year-old child, pulled away from her toys by "Her so-called mother," with an arm around her waist, leading her into that small ground-floor room in the Comparini house in the Via Vittoria. She went rigid when he touched her. He resented it. "I am young in soul,/ Nor old in body" (XI, 1021-22) he tells the priests. Thus it was from the first, he claims, that "she begins with wronging me," and therefore he is one "who cannot but begin with hating her." (XI, 1031-32)

It was all so inevitable, he tells them, inevitable from the very start. The feeling of murder began to rise up within him from the moment of their meeting and from the madness of their marriage. After the ceremony, and once in Arezzo, "there we stand again!" He felt it, a something that had never been so pronounced before. It caused him to laugh. "Why, in the very gripe/ O' the jaws of death's gigantic skull do I/ Grin back his grin?" (XI, 1034-36) Something was stirring inside him, brought on entirely by her actions, her "way." During the ceremony, she gets up, "kneels, rises, speaks, is silent,--goes." My horse does the same, he says. I have brought my horse "To stand stock still and front the

fire he dreads." (XI, 1945)

How can I help but remember this and "Resent the very obedience?" There would have been "compensation in revolt," he says, but to obey blindly was the worst thing she could have done. After all, one can quell a revolt, but not "predetermined saintship." (XI, 1053) His friends began to come around and admonish him to treat her right, that he and she could at least be friends, even though she was sexually cold to him. But no, Guido says, I deserved all of her and I wanted all of her, just in the manner of younger men. And she resisted every step of the way and became like a plague to him. Moreover, the whole problem was compounded "By two abominable nondescripts," Pietro and Violante. (XI, 1114) The three of them together made a hydra-headed monster which he was forced to slay. The mother had a sort of "cunning and cant" all her own, "Tempting the sudden fist of man too much." (XI, 1135) As for Pietro, well, Cardinal, "you know/ The kind of idiot!--rife are such in Rome." (XI, 1137-38) They are the asses of society with their jokes shed from corn and all the while, in the next breath, they are pontificating, advising, "Sir Dignity i' the Dumps," spouting their cliches. Visualize this fellow, this "quondum oracle" dressed outrageously and holding forth in his house at the Via Vittoria, "Flaunting his tom-fool tawdry just the same/ As if Ash Wednesday were mid-Carnival!" (XI, 1154-55)

Here was my unforgiveable sin, Guido says, in toadying

up to this ass. He asks the priests if they have ever been in a similar position. "Have you stooped/ For your own ends to bestialize yourself/ By flattery of a fellow of this stamp?" (XI, 1157-59) People like Pietro might say, "'You love and honor me, of course: what next?'" And Guido's answer turned out to be, "What, but the trifle of the stabbing, friend?" (XI, 1163) Was I angry about the whole situation? "How could I be otherwise?" he asks. These two pretentious old fools meant to fool him. But he fooled them instead and they got what they deserved.

When they then in turn fooled him by publishing Pompilia's illegitimacy abroad in Rome, the story was believed instantly because of the two people who told it. Note "hell's lucky malice" here, Guido tells them. Coming from their mouths, the story rang true because "They plainly were too stupid to invent." (XI, 1226) Thus there was a "good long laugh" at Guido's expense by his so-called friends in both Rome and Arezzo. And when Guido eventually did murder the three of them, each stab went the deeper because of a fancy he had that at the bottom of each wound was the smirk of a friend's face and he was wiping it out too.

Guido feels that he is spending too much time discussing "These two ambiguous insects," Pietro and Violante, as if it were their actions that really troubled him. "Ay, but Pompilia," he continues, finally getting around to the subject he has somewhat avoided.

He admits that, compared to Pietro and Violante, she is "of alien blood." (XI, 1288) Why did he extend his claim and "exact/ Her portion of the penalty?" (XI, 1289-90) He wants to take pains with this part of his story. He wants to demonstrate to them step-by-step, "lead her by degrees," how she came to be murdered. He begins at that point where the Comparini left her alone with him in Arezzo. It was her behavior, he says. She was like stone. "'Bless me or curse me,'" he told her. But she would not admit to his existence. I tell her "'Speak!' she obeys, 'Be silent!' she obeys." (XI, 1319) Everyday it was "the same stone strength of white despair," (XI, 1323) and he knew, of a certainty, that it would never be otherwise.

When the parents were there, she played the female game, cried, talked, flew to the Archbishop and the Governor. But once she learned she was illegitimate she withdrew from life; she gave up. From Guido's point of view, it was the worst thing she could have done. Her new game lay in giving up the game, "This worst offence of not offending more." Guido could not tolerate the fact that he did not exist in her eyes. He believes that Pompilia instinctively realized that this kind of behavior on her part would be the worst possible thing she could do to him.

She sits, she stares, she endlessly combs her hair. "This self-possession to the uttermost," Guido says, is what undid him. It was like "the terrible patience of God," (XI,

1378) All of which meant, he concludes, that she did not love him. And even if she did not, she could have pretended love for him. "Here's my slave,/ Whose body and soul depend upon my nod," and she cannot utter even one word in order to placate him.

She was not willing to begin with a lie--that is, pretend she loved him--even if it would end with the truth that she actually could love him. Therefore, Guido says, "I judged, sentenced, and punished her." (XI, 1430)

But why dwell on particulars? he asks. Why try to defend my actions? The truth is, I hated her, and for no other reason than that it gave me pleasure to hate her. It was simply my nature to hate her. The world itself is like this. "Why," he argues, "should you master natural caprice?" It is simply "Pure nature!" Human beings are like this, and if you must blame someone, you will have to find other faults to blame. Because, he says, "as God's my judge/ I see not where the fault lies, that's the truth!" (XI, 1447-48) And for once Guido means every word he says; he is not fooling any longer.

2

Guido considers the objection that he did not have to torture her or hate her; he could have turned his marriage to account in other ways. But there it is, friend, he tells them, you have stumbled on the thing--"The red thing!" (XI,

1456) Because, you see, practice makes man perfect. And he has practiced being what he is for years. He has turned it into an art. What if he was again given the chance? Say it was "the same marriage and no other wife," you can be assured that he would follow the very same path again. "That's because/ I'm practised, grown fit guide for Guido's self." (XI, 1459-60)

He laments his oversight at Castlenuovo. There is no question now in his mind that here was his first mistake. I was like an artist, he says, and some particular devil tripped me up when I had found the "all-but-at-perfection." The line of his painting slurred just at that point where "paint leaves off/ And life begins." (XI, 1555-56) It is "Artistry's haunting curse, the Incomplete." (XI, 1559) This is the only way he can describe it; it is inexplicable to him otherwise. "Being incomplete, the act escaped success." (XI, 1560)

There was the same incompleteness in the murder itself. When he approached the door of their small villa in the Pauline district he had a major problem: if there were three inside, two might get away, one for certain. And what if there were visitors in looking at the new baby? That would make even more. They would shout warnings. He felt even so, if he could just get to Pompilia, "If only she is stomped and stamped on, good!" Miraculously enough, the impossible came his way and he got all three. His masterpiece was proceeding splendidly at this point. He cannot describe the relief the

three murders brought him. "Oh, Cardinal, the deep long sigh you heave/ When the load's off you." (XI, 1609-10) He should have known, however, that because he was so drunk with his own triumph, some reverse was sure to follow. There is no other way to account for the "perfect failure" of what followed.

Any other day of the week, he says indignantly, and he could have bribed the guard and secured the horses without the necessary ticket. Yet when he tries the trick, doubles the bribe, and even calls himself a Duke rather than a Count, he gets nowhere. He even adds to his story "the dead man was only a Jew,/ And for my pains find I am dealing just/ With the one scrupulous fellow in all Rome." (XI, 1635) It seems doubly fantastic to him now since he would have had no trouble in securing the ticket for the horses before the murder.

Thus he and his four men had to walk out of Rome and collapsed in exhaustion just before they reached that boundary which would have placed them outside of Rome's jurisdiction; had they got within the jurisdiction of the Tuscan court, they would have had no trouble, since that Court had already delivered a favorable verdict to Guido. The fact that a scrap of paper was his downfall is the "spite of fortune," says Guido--just sheer bad luck.

And the worst was, Pompilia was still alive. Otherwise even though caught, he could have made up a story about how he came to claim his son and heir and again found his wife

in the arms of "that priest." (XI, 1713) Ironically enough, he has recently heard that Pompilia, from her deathbed, forgives him, but by living to forgive him, she has also told enough of her story to seal his doom. Her forgiveness is no good to him. Even more ironically, he has found out that, even if he had escaped, his four "rustic swains" had planned to murder him on the road back to Arezzo because he had neglected to pay them for their part of the job. At least, since at the execution he will go last, he can have the pleasure of seeing them hang.

His trial, he continues, "bites like a corrosive" still, because it too was so completely contrary to what one might ordinarily expect. And then, when he saw a cranny of light at the end in the person of the old Pope, expecting "a little pity. . ./ A little indulgence to rank and privilege," (XI, 1775-76) he received the same verdict. "'Die!'/ Bids Law--'Be damned!' adds Gospel." (XI, 1781-82) From such bad luck, Guido claims he has gained strength; he feels as though he is a "brave fighter" who can turn defeat into victory.

It is all tied up with his beliefs, he tells them. "I think I never was any time/ A Christian, as you nickname all the world." (XI, 1914-15) He believes that they know what he means. Let us call a "truce" on nonsense, he pleads, just for a moment. Christianity is just a mask, he says, and both of them know it. "The rationale of your scheme is just/ 'Pay toll here, there pursue your pleasure free!'" (XI, 1965-66)

And when they do pay the toll, are they doing it to propitiate a God who devised the scheme in the first place? "Irrational bunglers!" Guido declares. Thus their "living truth" which has killed all pagan gods and all pagan ideas now "Prays leave to hold its own and live good days" provided it can keep on its grotesque mask. But Christianity discounted in man the one thing, the "inexorable need in man for life." (XI, 1980) Christianity substituted death for life and, though man puts on the mask and accepts it, behind his mask he is laughing.

In an earlier age, he argues, maybe there were saints who starved and froze and imposed incredible disciplines upon themselves. But in his age, this has all passed and it is "sin on the sly." For most of us, the letter of the Christian law is too strict; we obey the spirit, we say. Ah, but, Guido says, "there's a wink somewhere." (XI, 2001)

Guido knows the speech they want to make to him. They want to point out that he traces all issues to the love of life and so do they; however, he has put them on the defensive since he knew perfectly well what the password was that would soothe the populace. They cannot allow him to play his pranks out in broad daylight and then disdain to even give an excuse to the world. If he had wrapped up his murder in Christianity, it would have been different. It then would not have been murder but sacrifice. But he did not do this.

Well, Guido says, so be it. Let death atone for my

mistake. At least, in this way, he can drop all his disguises, "turn wolf, be whole, and sate, for once" his wolf's nature. He can now "Wallow in what is now a wolfishness." He can "Grow out of man,/ Glut the wolf-nature." And when he does glut his nature, then he will turn into a real man, "be man indeed and all man." (XI, 2059) It will be the final culmination of his growth, "Deformed, transformed, reformed, informed, conformed!" (XI, 2061) His honest instinct--to be a wolf--he has kept pent up all his life. Death will let it surge like a volcano that erupts after years of underground rumblings.

As for Pompilia, he knows she had her world just as he has his. He is at odds with her world. He hates her completely, everlastingly, partially because she does not hate him. He is the kind of person, he says, who, if he saw his chance to escape to heaven, would hesitate if it meant raising the foot he had been using to keep his foe pinned to the ground. "So am I made," Guido admits. (XI, 2098) He sees the contrast between her world and his. Her world is of "pure design." Some prefer this, he says, but as for him, he will take the "gorge of color." Just in the choice of women, Pompilia was too pure; there was too much of the "faint fine gauze untouched" about her. (XI, 2129) As for him, he will take someone like Lucrezia Borgia. He wants "meat and drink" rather than "purity and pallor." He wants an evil wife--a woman full-blown in her evil; someone with "sin un-

imaginable." (XI, 2216)

It is vain, he tells the priests, to come here and "try to change, what should not change,/ And cannot." (XI, 2221-22) He begins to speak somewhat more hurriedly, since he knows that his time is short. They should save him not just because they know he is right. Even if he were wrong, he deserves to be saved because of the fact that he is what he is. Then he changes his attitude and says belligerently, "Why, you don't think I hope you'll say one word?" He pauses and looks anxiously. "Come, I am tired of silence!" He tells them. He wants them to talk, "I have gone inside my soul/ And shut its door behind me." Your Church's torch only made my place darker. But God, in reality, gives each person his instinct for defense. Pompilia's instinct was to be "lamblike." Guido's instinct was to break the back of those he embraces--"That's the wolf-nature." (XI, 2316)

Things could be a lot worse, he tells them with an air of bravado. But in his case, it has made him stronger. "I begin to taste my strength," he tells them. He laughs at his two confessors. He reminds the Cardinal of the latter's foolish hopes of becoming Pope. "Go eat your heart, you'll never be a Pope!" (XI, 2338) And he has heard that the Cardinal forsook his one true love for promotion in the Church and that she is now dead.

It amuses him, too, that they are all really part of the same river of life and that they all must die. Guido is

merely going a minute or two sooner. He thinks he would rather go quickly anyway, though he does not know into what state his soul will move. He tells them seriously and pointedly, "You never know what life means till you die." (XI, 2373) He realizes that "Even throughout life, 't is death that makes life live,/ Gives it whatever the significance."

For you see, he tells them, even if we look at it from your own doctrines and arguments, if life had no death to fear, how could man find a possibility of nobleness? "What's love, what's faith," he asks, "without a worst to dread?" Faith and love, however, "With death behind them bidding do or die," (XI, 2381-82) give us the challenge we need. If there is a new rule in the next world he goes to, they can be sure he will accept it just "as here,/ I recognized no law I could not see/ There, what I see, I shall acknowledge too." (XI, 2386-88)

Thus, "All that was, is; and must for ever be." (XI, 2397) It is not in him to "unhate his hates." In fact he has some strength left and he will use it once more to strike Pietro, Violante and Pompilia in the face. He has no use of sickeningly sweet "cloying cups." No, men like him want the "hot bull's-blood." Then he adds proudly, "I lived and died a man, and take man's chance." (XI, 2410)

But suddenly, there in the darkness of his prison cell, Guido hears them coming for him. "Who are these you

have let descend my stair?" he asks with growing fright. He becomes panic-stricken. It is "Treachery!" In a wild terror he tells them that he did not mean any of what he said, that he wants to take it all back. "All was folly," he insists. "Sirs, my first true word, all truth and no lie,/ Is--save me notwithstanding." (XI, 2418-19) Save me in spite of everything, he begs. The only truth that exists for him now is in his staying alive. "Life is all!" he screams. "I was just stark mad," but let the madman live. They can put him in chains and throw him into prison for the rest of his life if he can only live.

He begs them not to open the gate. "Hold me from them! I am yours." He will be anything they want him to be. "I am the Granduke's son--no, I am the Pope's!" (XI, 2423)

Finally he calls on all the people who are of importance in his life, and he calls on them in a psychologically ascending order.[1] "Abate,--Cardinal,--Christ,--Maria,--God, . . ./ Pompilia." (XI, 2424-25)

"Pompilia," he cries, "will you let them murder me?" (XI, 2425)

4

Guido's "real" world depends upon a society that he has in part helped to create by his own imagination. He is following Browning's dictum that we must help shape our

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[1]Langbaum, The Poetry of Experience, p. 111.

realities. He is doing what Pompilia and Caponsacchi did. But even though he uses his creative abilities, it is for the purpose of destroying; at the same time, it is for the purpose of continuing to create and extend his own destructive values. Such a process cannot hope to sustain itself; it has its own built-in destruction because what it needs in order to create is what it also destroys. Guido is instinctively and whole-heartedly committed to a course of evil. He must create in order to externalize what he feels inside himself. He must somehow relate his evil to the external world, give his evil social application. He must dramatize his evil in order to give it significance and in order to give him satisfaction. The evil must be related to others or else it is evil in a vacuum. It needs things outside of itself to feed on.

Thus he is creating rapidly, furiously, frantically. But he is a painter who is "obstructed," he tells us. Just when he is almost at perfection, some of "hell's lucky malice" rebounds on him. The very evil that he believes in, turns on him and destroys his old corruptions even as he creates his new ones. He calls it sheer bad luck, "the luck that lies beyond a man." Unlike Pompilia, who can create and reach for her new reality, even though it is beyond her, Guido is denied this possibility because, since he creates for the purpose of destroying, nothing that he does or is can sustain itself.

Hence his own personality is shattering into a thousand pieces. He calls his own greatest masterpiece--the murder--his greatest failure because of "Artistry's haunting curse--the Incomplete." (XI, 1559) This is something, he implies, that haunts all great artists. Even while he admits that other artists have leaped the barrier of the Incomplete and produced masterpieces, he cannot explain his inability to do this. He does not see that as he pursues evil, it is doubling back and pursuing him. He does not understand the nature of the universe he lives in. He dimly perceives that reality as he sees it is changing, that out of destruction and the dung-heap of Roman society rises the fragile flower of Pompilia. But he does not at first understand why this is.

He does not understand that in order to help create his own reality, he has to have not only the will-to-believe but the will to believe in something beyond himself. Guido is not willing to consider this. He argues that we do what we do by instinct--that it is hopeless to try to be any different--that God or fate or whatever, made us this way and we cannot hope to be any other way. He wants to give full play to his wolf's nature; he has no wish to believe that there is anything beyond that nature except the mask that we all have to put on. He admits that Pompilia is an exception but he does not understand why. It is just her instinct to be this way, and she could not have done other than she

did. He does not credit Pompilia with reaching beyond herself because of her will to believe, and achieving something more by applying her creative abilities to help re-shape her reality and give form and meaning to her "instincts." He wants to "wallow" in his wolf's nature, to sate it, to give himself over completely to his own self. Thus what he creates is for this end. He makes no distinctions among satisfactions. All satisfactions lie in what he calls pleasure; they are all sensual and they are the highest pleasures we know. Some we cannot have because the Church, and agencies like the Church, tell us it is wicked; they punish us when we do take those pleasures but the punishment is motivated by their own envy.

It would be different if Christianity were a sure thing, but it is not. For Guido, life is the only sure thing. It is not much, in some respects, but it is all he has. He believes in it fervently; he uses his artistic imagination to help create a reality that he will be able to move around in while living this life. He argues that he can in no way change what he is. Moreover, he feels that he should not and would not change his nature even if he could. He blames the state of things for the way he is, yet he suggests that that state of things was in part created by people who possessed imaginative abilities like his and realized that they could help mold the reality in which they lived. Nature made him the way he is, he rationalizes, contradicting

his own assertion that nature is plastic and can be leavened and molded by the people who live within its boundaries. Thus he denies his argument even while he is asserting it.

Such is his way on every level of experience. Such is the way that he creates while he destroys. In murdering the Comparini and Pompilia, Guido helps to create and extend the boundaries of his evil world. But those boundaries begin to constrict once they start to push against the boundaries of society. Evil is nothing without a society to relate it to. Society can accept or reject the evil. If it rejects it, then the evil can only rebound back on its original source. Guido explains this by an analogy when he says "I have gone inside my soul/ And shut its door behind me." (XI, 2289-90) Once he turns his back on the possibility of extending his reality outside of himself, he is destroying whatever he creates. His "paintings" will always be spoiled in this way. There will always be that line of his painter's brush that slurs just where "paint leaves off/ And life begins." (XI, 1564-65)

His art cannot live without life. His art is his evil as it is dramatized and externalized, and he cannot exercise it without including life itself. Instead, however, he goes inside his soul and shuts the door behind him. His evil, he believes, will be self-sustaining. And Guido himself proves, for a long while, that this is indeed the way it works. He has sustained himself, and the myth of himself, by destruction. But before, he did it by putting on the mask

of society and the Church. Now that he has taken off that mask, he wallows in the lust of his true wolf's nature; he maintains that he is the stronger for it, that he is finally a real man and "all man." He does not see that it is his wolf's nature that ultimately destroyed the elaborate, artificial mask he has worn for so many years and for which he went to such artistic pains to create; he does not see that anything he creates like this will always be destroyed by the same nature that created it. He confesses that he felt instinctively that the kind of situation he created when he married Pompilia and set up a scheme to cheat her parents was going to end in destruction. He felt it at the time. By marriage, he attempted to extend his own values, but they could not be extended to Pompilia. He could never destroy her purity. Instead of contaminating her with his destruction, she "corrupted" him with her purity. His evil had no place to go but to fly back on him. This is why Guido, immediately after he had murdered the three of them, felt such a tremendous weight lifted off his shoulders. He felt that now his evil had more room in which to extend itself.

To give the chaos of his own soul some semblance of order, Guido paints a picture of human motivation and behavior which will enable him to satisfy his own corrupt desires. This is a painting he constructs imaginatively in his own mind. It is analogous to the false portrait he drew of Italian society in his first monologue. But this time there is no mask. This is what Guido actually believes.

Now that we see what he believes, it is obvious that he has not been able to help create order and purpose in his wolf's lair. "Get pleasure, 'scape pain," no matter what the means, is the anarchic principle which he attempts to offer as a rationale for his disordered reality. He believes that all people are like this, because he is like this. He hints that if it were not for the masks that we all put on, he would be able to extend his values outwardly from himself since all people, being like him, would accept them.

He points out frequently to the priests that they know what he means, and he knows they know. If they wish to continue to hide behind their masks, well and good, but they are not fooling him. He knows that Christianity is simply one more mask we put on to achieve our pleasure and profit. He admits the possibility that long ago there might have been a "living faith" but that it is now "ludicrously dead." Now, he maintains, we play a "faithful part" because it is convenient for us to do so; we act on the "frank faithless principle" that we are "Born-baptized-and-bred Christian atheists!" (XI, 709) Since that is so, underneath it all, he has just as much right to judge as the two priests to whom he is speaking. But now they have put a mask over their mask and they say that he must die.

Guido argues that he would have accepted Christianity seriously except for "a spice of doubt"; Christianity makes promises but no one can know if it keeps them, since the dead

cannot talk. For Guido, it has to be all or nothing. He feels that following his own nature to the limits of its possibilities gives him the "all" that he desires. There is no guesswork here. He knows that evil is more of a certainty inside him than Christianity could ever be. Even though that certainty of evil has no purpose it is impossible for him to deny its presence. Instead of using his creative consciousness to mold and work his evil nature into good, Guido rationalizes his behavior by stating that it is not his fault, that God made him the way he is. He considers but dismisses the possibility that his nature could have been changed, had he wished to apply his creative abilities in that direction. Any time he cannot justify his behavior from within himself, he falls back on the notion of determinism; God and the preachers have nobody to blame but themselves.

For most people, faith is an illusion because, as Guido sees it, it is not in our nature to be faithful, particularly if we are experiencing pain; instead we take the "natural" course and attempt to escape pain, no matter what the means, and get back on the road to pleasure. Since "faith gains most,--feign faith!" (XI, 770)

Such is the way things are and "brother-like" we all passed this word around, recognizing that it was the mask we had to put on. Now, Guido claims, he is being put to death for feigning faith and playing the role that was assigned

to him. Part of his role consisted in giving tham a plausible story after the murder, and now they tell him that plausibility--which always served in the past--is not enough. The story has to be true also. They call his act a crime but in reality it was a blunder. For Guido, there can be no such thing as a crime. Perhaps one could call it a crime to not wear one's mask properly, but to call something a "crime" was before always one more part of the mask. We call something someone does a crime because of the pleasure and the profit they get at our expense. If they can get away with it, it is their gain. If we punish them, it is one more person who is not going to get in the way of our pleasures.

5

For some reason the path he took was the wrong one. He can see that in retrospect. Though on the one hand Guido insists that he did what he did on the basis of the "old license" always granted to noblemen, on the other hand he nevertheless as good as admits that he somehow violated that license. He thus contradicts his own defense.

In going back over his story, he seeks the solution to his mistake in again examining the nature of Pompilia. He does not, in a sense, think it necessary to understand Pompilia because they are alike in one respect; they are both true to their natures. He feels that this is all the explanation that is necessary. Yet he realizes that in some

ways she has defeated him. This is what perplexes him. This is what enraged him before and caused him to murder her.

He says he felt the inevitability of murder when they were first married, a feeling from the start that his nature would not be able to tolerate hers. He felt it as a challenge to him, a test of his creative efforts, a contest between two ways of molding reality. He had to murder her because he had to have the concrete symbol of the victory of his way of life over hers. Pompilia needed no symbols like this, but Guido had nothing else to fall back on. There was nothing but destruction behind him, including thirty years of pursuing his meaningless pleasures in Rome.

The murder he calls his noble failure, his near-masterpiece. But he is unable to complete it. Guido does not see that, because of the nature of his wolf's-lair, no such thing as artistic completion is possible for him. He cannot complete that which by its very nature cannot be completed. In attempting to forge his artistry through murder, Guido gets a sense of momentary completion, a drunken moment of triumph in which he feels as if he has completely fulfilled his own nature, has given it an order and structure, a kind of final solution, that it has never had before.

But it is this very act of creativity which destroys him, because in creating (by murdering) he is killing the thing he needs, the thing that he feeds on, to sustain his reality. In the murder itself, it is not Pietro and Violante

whom he wants so much as it is Pompilia. It is she who is a terrible threat to everything that he stands for. He admits that he hated her for the simple reason that it was his nature to hate her. It was "pure nature" on his part and he saw no reason to master his "natural caprice." (XI, 1437) He did not wish to have it any other way. He tells them plainly that "practice makes man perfect" and that he has applied all his creative energies to making himself the perfect villain; he has turned it into a kind of art and this art is a "fit guide" for all his actions.

In admitting that in some ways he violated the "old license" granted to him by wearing the mask, he thinks that his first mistake was in not killing Pompilia and Caponsacchi when he caught them at the inn. He does not give as his reasons that in killing them then he might have lost the dowry and the possibility of gaining Pietro's possessions. This apparently was not a consideration for Guido. He charges his oversight again to the notion of the "Incomplete." He dimly perceives that the incomplete is part of the nature of evil, but he does not see that it has the same sort of inevitability as everything else that has happened to him.

Thus, in his mood of exultation immediately after the murder, Guido received a momentary sense of order and completion. He felt that he had at last finished his masterpiece. But he did not complete it, he says, because of "the luck that lies beyond a man." He does not see this idea of

luck as being inevitably bound up with the act itself. There was a hole in the net that he accidentally overlooked and the fish slipped through. This same hole, of course, would always be in all the nets he might make. Even the mask he wore in Rome for thirty years developed holes. How can he ever complete that thing he desires when he has to destroy all of the elements that go into its creation, in order to complete the creation?

Moreover, he does not see the full significance of the plan to murder him which his four assistants devised on their way back to Arezzo. He does not see that what he does not destroy, when he uses it to assist him in the creation of his various masterpieces, will ultimately destroy him.

6

At first, Guido maintains that the whole experience has made him stronger. He feels an heroic quality surging through him. Now that he has thrown off his mask he can fully satiate his wolf's nature and give complete expression to his creative-destructive abilities. Only in this way, he says, can he "be whole." But in achieving completion in this way, Guido must destroy himself. Since evil is finally destructive, and can only fulfill itself by destroying, Guido's evil nature can only fulfill itself by destroying itself. By his tone and by his feeling about the wolf's nature and the "bull's-blood," Guido seems to sense this

imaginatively. By admitting his "wolfishness" he is finally a "real man." He is, in other words, true to his life and his art. This gives him the same feeling of deep satisfaction that a similar realization brings to Pompilia and Caponsacchi. But he knows too, that he must die to complete his manhood.

He figuratively describes why destructiveness can only find completion in death when he contrasts his way of life with Pompilia's. Pompilia's nature is of a "pure design." He realizes that in purity there is goodness and in design there is a structure, an order to this goodness. As for himself, he prefers the "gorge of color." There is no design here, no shape, only large blobs of red that spread out in all directions.

There is no question, however, that Guido's sense of fulfillment and manliness is itself a temporary thing. For he knows that if he is destroyed, the feeling of manliness he gets from admitting his wolf's nature and destroying himself will be the last deep satisfaction he will ever have. He is a man who has always believed in life--life at any cost, and it is not a comforting thought to know that he finally must die in order to fulfill his nature.

As he hears the footsteps of the guards coming for him, he begins to genuinely panic. For he senses that nothing he has said, no matter how true or how false or how fulfilling, can compare with the feeling of being alive. So

it is that he can almost scream out that nothing is the truth except life. "Life is all!" he exclaims. All the rest of it is talk. His sense of courage and his brief heroic behavior are as nothing compared to the state of being alive. Thus when he calls on those people who have been of importance in his life, he calls on them in a psychologically ascending order. Pompilia is the last name he calls because he feels in the deepest part of himself that she somehow has a better chance of saving him than anyone else.

When he cries out "Pompilia, will you let them murder me?" (XI, 2425) it is not that he is simply whining because he does not wish to die; nor is it an indication that he is repenting. He genuinely has no wish to repent. If he repented he would deny the significance of the brief satisfaction he gets from giving up life for the sake of his wolf's nature. He calls on Pompilia because he now understands that her reality and the process of her moral creativity will allow her to stoop down and touch his forehead, even though she has the full knowledge of his impenitent wolf's nature and his absolute commitment to that truth that has always been a lie.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE BOOK AND THE RING

1

"Here were the end, had anything an end," (XII, 1) Browning says.

A rocket was "lit and launched," and it soared up and up until it reached the vault of Heaven; there, for one breathless moment it seemed to seize heaven and hold it by force. Just so, the incredible Guido "caught spark,/ Rushed to the height" and hung at the height of his power for an instant, "Over men's upturned faces." (XII, 7) But he then suffered the inevitable decline. "The act, over and ended, falls and fades." For a while it was talked about; it lost something each time it was told; then it melted into the gray of our memory, and finally died and left everything dark.

"And presently we find the stars again." (XII, 19) Guido's blackness, which momentarily eclipsed us all, is gone.

2

Browning tells us that of all the reports that were circulated about concerning the day of the execution, he thinks only four are significant and worth relating for any

additional light they might shed on the case.

The first letter, addressed to a friend, is from a Venetian nobleman in Rome for the Carnival. The Venetian, in a lively style, recounts the important social and political goings-on of the day. He wonders and guesses incorrectly at who will be the next Pope after Innocent XII, who "'totters on the verge o' the grave,'" dies.

The Venetian says that a week ago the Pope was seen walking in the sun along the riverside near the sea he loves. But yesterday, because of the "'outrageous rain,'" he was trapped inside; on such days he usually has fainting fits and "'fumbles at his beads.'" (XII, 58) The Venetian is not aware that the Pope spent that entire day and much of the night reaching his decision about the murder-case.

The Venetian turns from political and social matters to the day's most important cause-celebre, the execution of Guido Franceschini. The execution is over and he has lost some money on a wager because he did not think that the Pope would not pardon Guido. "'The Pope has done his worst: I have to pay/ For the execution of the Count, by Jove!'" (XII, 75-6) Prejudices, the Venetian claims, got the upper hand in the Pope and he ignored "'justice, prudence, and esprit de corps.'" (XII, 86)

According to the Venetian, two priests, one a Cardinal and the other an Abate,--both friends of the Franceschini--went to the prison to take Guido's confession, and give him comfort. The Venetian understands that their efforts were

"'crowned with complete success.'" When Guido and his four peasants were led on carts through the streets, there was a great crowd all along the way and much excitement. Guido was much admired for his intrepidity, "'nay, nonchalance,'" as the procession headed for the People's Square. (XII, 135)

The Pope had directed that the execution take place in the People's Square, rather than the customary place--the Bridge of Saint Angelo--because he wanted all the noblemen to witness the execution as a warning to them. The Venetian says this was apparently done out of malice, and as a "'conciliatory sop to the mob,'" but is not such a bad place for an execution.

Bleachers were set up in the Square and it was there that he and his party heard that one of the carts ran over and killed a man as the procession winded its way through the streets. There was "'excitement to the last.'" Some of the crowd paid to observe the spectacle from windows all around the square.

"'With the name of Jesus on his lips,'" Guido "'Received the fatal blow.'" The executioner held up Guido's head to the crowd and the Venetian admits that he and the other foreign visitors were disappointed. They had heard that Guido was over six feet tall, and young for his age, "'if not handsome, dignified at least.'" (XII, 195) But the head held up before them was indeed, "'no face to please a wife!'" (XII, 196)

The second report which Browning mentions is a letter from Guido's lawyer Arcangeli to his colleague in Florence, Cenceni, who was later responsible for collecting the documents of the case and turning them into The Old Yellow Book. Cenceni had tried to defend Guido with some more points regarding clerical privilege but his protestations came too late. Arcangeli claims the Count still receives the "'commiseration and respect'" of all Rome. Then, the "business" part of his letter over, Arcangeli adds a personal message to his colleague in which he calls him "'old fox.'" He says that twenty pleadings of clerical privilege would have done no good when "'Somebody's thick headpiece'" is bent on seeing "'Guido's drop in the bag.'" (XII, 300) He blames almost all of it on the Pope. "'How these old men like giving youth a push!'" he exclaims. (XII, 301) He bemoans the fact that he got little good out of his own "superb" defense. Just as dying animals will often give one last kick or twitch before they die, so the Pope, "'feebleness i' the socket shoots its last'" in "'A spite of violence.'" (XII, 316-17)

He tells Cenceni that he promised his over-indulged son that if he failed to save Guido's head, at least the boy could go see it get chopped off. When Giacento, his son, was sitting in his box at the execution, he defended his father's handling of the case against a noblewoman's teasing that this time Bottini "ruled the roost." Giacento's ingenious reply, boasts Arcangeli, was that his father knew

better than to wage war with the Pope.

Arcangeli admits that he strains "every nerve" in working for his son. His next cases will help plaster up any part of his head that Bottini has broken by his victory.

Next Browning turns to a letter written by Bottini, "to no matter who," in which we discover that Bottini has as many reservations about his victory as Arcangeli has about his defeat. Arcangeli was certain that Bottini would become more overbearing than ever but Bottini frets and is not satisfied. He **begins** confidently by asserting that "'I had, as usual, the plain truth to plead.'" (XII, 409) Guido was tortured and confessed his crimes; Bottini is certain that he repented and "'Died like a saint, poor devil!'"

He imagines that Arcangeli is feeling triumphant because the latter held his foe off for a full month of wrangling at the trial, then was granted a temporary respite while he and Cenceni turned the tables on Bottini and pleaded clerical privilege. Bottini soothes some of his resentment by claiming that most of the work was done by that "'mannikan and dandiprat,'" Spreti, Arcangeli's assistant.

What Bottini resents much more is the sermon which Pompilia's confessor, Fra Celestino, preached Sunday, the day previous, in the Church of San Lorenzo. And even now part of the friar's speech has been printed and is being circulated through Rome. "'That meddler preached to purpose yesterday/ At San Lorenzo,'" (XII, 449) and damaged some of

the best points that Bottini had made at the trial.

Fra Celestino's sermon is a passionate and somewhat bitter plea to the people to realize the full significance of the murder-case. Do people conclude, that because Pompilia's purity prevails, that truth triumphs in the end? When by a miracle, the dove returned safely to the ark, it did not restore to life all the doves who lay in waste under the water, those who were "'Beauty made blank and harmlessness destroyed!'" (XII, 486) Drawing the conclusion to his analogy, Fra Celestino wants to know how many sisters of Pompilia, "chaste and noble," could have used a hand to extricate them from their horror, and now lie strangled? Pompilia is like the dove; her victory is the exception. Out of the welter, she was plucked from "'the world's calumny/ Stupidity, simplicity,'" the world's attitude of "'who cares?'" (XII, 490-91)

Law failed Pompilia, just as the Church did. The best defense Pompilia's lawyer could devise, was that wickedness is part of the flesh and it was part of Pompilia. If God had not exposed this particular case to the light, Pompilia's fate would have been the same as her sisters'. Her miracle was in part due to the "'true instinct of an old good man'"--the Pope, who "'happens to hate darkness and love light,'" (XII, 594)

Had not God stepped in,man's speech would have doomed Pompilia. This is the message of Fra Celestino's preaching, that "'God is true,/ And every man a liar.'" (XII, 600-01)

Anyone who trusts human testimony and takes it as a fact is himself betrayed a fool. (XII, 603) Man's speech is false. Truth is reserved for heaven, not earth, and man should learn "'to love what he may speak some day.'" (XII, 607)

Bottini feels that Fra Celestino's sermon, if it receives wide enough circulation, will damage his reputation and the status of the legal profession. But by a sheer stroke of luck, he has found his final answer to Fra Celestino's argument. Those saintly sisters-in-the-cloth to the good friar have just retained Bottini to undertake proceedings against Pompilia's estate.

For, Bottini argues, though Guido has been proved guilty of murder, Pompilia was never proved innocent of adultery. By law, the nuns may claim legal rights to the possessions of those who die while officially under their care. This delights Bottini. "No adequate machinery in law?" he chortles to Fra Celestino.

But as Bottini's letter comes to an end, Browning interposes with the information that Bottini lost his case the following September, due to the Pope's insistence that Pompilia's truth be unmolested. Thus, Browning says, here we find "Justice done a second time!"

3

"And so an end of all i' the story," Browning says. (XII, 775) The Old Yellow Book he owes to Cenceni's care and he wonders how it will be when this book--"my four year's

intimate,"--and he part company. (XII, 228-229) He cannot tell us what happened to Pompilia's son Gaetano, because history leaves no record of him. Browning wonders what his dreams were "if he grew a man?" (XII, 814) Was he proud, did he love his mother, did he "fight i' the ranks, unnoticed by the world?" (XII, 821-22)

Although this "old woe" has faded from memory Browning had found an ember still feebly aglow, and had breathed a spark into flame. Now the tale lives again, "If precious be the soul of man to man." (XII, 830)

Thus, his "British Public" may like him yet, though they have not always liked him in the past. "Learn one lesson" at least, he entreats them, which is that our human speech is nothing, "Our human testimony false, our fame/ And human estimation words and wind." (XII, 835-36)

But why, they might ask, has he taken "the artistic way to prove so much?" (XII, 837) The way Browning sees it, "Art remains the one way possible/ Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine, at least." (XII, 839-40)

The trouble with telling the truth is--when you look your brother in the face--the truth you tell, by the time it reaches him, "looks false,/ Seems to be just the thing it would supplant." (XII, 850-51) Under such circumstances, falsehood continues to do the work of truth. But in Art, man does in no way speak directly to men.

You see, Browning argues, "Art may tell a truth/

Obliquely." (XII, 855-56) Art can do the thing that will "breed the thought." Nor will art "wrong the thought" or distort the thought even though it by-passes the "mediate word." So may a painter paint a picture and "twice show truth,/ Beyond mere imagery on the wall." (XII, 858-59) So may a composer note by note "bring music from your mind" deeper than any you have felt.

So a poet, Browning says, may "write a book shall mean, beyond the facts,/ Suffice the eye and save the soul beside." (XII, 862-63)

"And save the soul!" This has been his intent, not only to save ours but his. "If the rough ore be rounded to a ring," it will have done the duty "which good ring should do." (XII, 865-66)

CHAPTER XIX

THE RING AND THE BOOK

1

Browning's achievement seems even more considerable if one contrasts it to the religious, political, economic and psychological tensions of his own time.

It has been well established by now that by the middle of the nineteenth century much of the old complacency--particularly among intellectuals (if indeed they ever had any to begin with)--was gone. The "men of light and learning"--to use Arnold's term--were faced with the fact of modern relativism. Dogmatic rationalism and the romantic tradition which was presumed to support it were no longer effective in dealing with the new concepts of scientific evolution and empirical relativism. Intellectuals, regardless of the field they worked in, were faced with great conflicts; some of these conflicts seemed quite irreconcilable in their own time. Men felt cut off from faith and belief. In the light of the new science, orthodox religious beliefs had to be abandoned or compromised. Belief itself, and the faith which supports it, were for the time being, impossible to attain.

In the field of literature and letters, the situation was no different. The title of E.D.H. Johnson's book, The Alien Vision of Victorian Poetry, is itself an indication of the conflict which Tennyson, Browning and Arnold faced in their own time.

Much of Arnold's poetry, according to Professor Johnson, deals with protagonists who are "invariably lonely and isolated figures, alien to their environment."[1] The conflict for Arnold's protagonist was one between "involvement in and aloofness from his environment."[2] Arnold never resolved this conflict in his poetry or apparently within himself. Instead, he rejected "the content and form of his earlier poetry" and turned to "objectivity and architectonice."[3] He began to regard poetry as a cultural agent, but in taking up narrative and dramatic forms such as "Tristram and Iseult," "Sohrab and Rustum," "Balder Dead," and "Merope" to demonstrate his rejection of introspection and his pursuit of objectivity, Arnold only succeeded in showing us that "he was temperamentally incapable" of making the change. The poems ultimately lapse into "the elegiac tone" found in Arnold's "The Scholar-Gypsy," which is itself a refutation of his principles regarding cultural objectivity. "Arnold's myths are really studies in

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[1]Cited in Frederic E. Faverty, ed., The Victorian Poets, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), p. 134.

[2]Ibid. [3]Ibid.

alienation,"[1] and when he turned to prose to give his age "intellectual deliverance" as Arnold the critic rather than Arnold the poet, he still preferred discussing the alienation of the individual; thus he was just as unsuccessful in resolving the conflict in prose as he was in poetry.

There is evidence to suggest that Tennyson suffered from a similar conflict, but whereas Arnold's was alienation from the environment, Tennyson's was alienation from himself. Professor Johnson has referred to this as Tennyson's "divided will."[2] The final impression left by the Idylls, says Johnson, is one of "tragic incompatibility between the life of the imagination and the ways of the world."[3]

Lionel Stevenson has demonstrated that "The Lady of Shalott" is a "'definite allegory of the poet's resolve 'to face the painful experiences of real life.'"[4] G. Robert Stange, in a discussion of Tennyson's mythology, shows how Tennyson modernized classical myths "by reading into them his personal doubts and conflicts."[5]

The reaction against Tennyson's popularity towards the end of his own life, which Tennyson himself commented upon, resulted in part from his own failure to portray and reflect his age in such a way that his "great mastery of

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[1]Faverty, p. 134. [2]Ibid., p. 50.

[3]Ibid. [4]Cited in Faverty, p. 52.

[5]Ibid., p. 53.

language was. . .accompanied by a commensurate power of feeling and ideas."[1]

In the most recent full-length study of Tennyson[2], Jerome H. Buckley vigorously maintains that Tennyson did not fail his age, and that "from the beginning he felt some responsibility to the society he lived in, and until the end he remained obedient to the one clear call of his own imagination."[3] However, there is little question that Tennyson both succeeded and failed in finding the poetic means to reconcile private feeling with public knowledge. This conflict seems to have been with him off and on throughout his life.

But the times themselves tell the story. C.F. Harrold has said that

> Merely to glance through the pages of Carlyle, Ruskin, or Arnold is to meet the surge and thunder of conflicting ideas; everywhere there are allusions to the advance of science, the revival of Anglicanism, the growth of democracy, the rapid spread of industrialism, the developing faith in "progress" and the "march of the mind."[4]

Scientists were "setting forth theories and facts which shook the framework of the world."[5] Everywhere, men were forced to

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[1]Ibid., p. 54.

[2]Tennyson: The Growth of a Poet (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).

[3]Ibid., p. 255.

[4]Charles Frederick Harrold and William D. Templeman, eds., English Prose of the Victorian Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. xiii.

[5]Ibid., p. xiv.

compromise their beliefs. In fact, as Harrold states, "the Victorian satisfaction with compromise makes that drama seem more and more like a tragedy."[1]

If Arnold and Tennyson could not find a way to go to the bottom of the age's deepest problems[2], Browning succeeded where they failed. Browning found the means to overcome the limitations of relativism by grounding his vision in the very empiricism which he needed to break through. He realized that, like the scientist, he had to start with the "pure crude facts," but that to create his reality he had to go beyond the facts.

Browning demonstrates in The Ring and the Book that empirical evidence is not enough, that the institutional machinery's ethic is always behind the truth that precedes it. That is, the machinery we use to "prove" truth shifts from age to age and truth is never in equilibrium with the machinery that is supposed to understand it.[3] This is because of the incomplete nature of empirical evidence. The facts are never all in at any given time.

Browning reminds us that individuals create society, even while society influences and helps shape the realities of individuals. Browning is aware that institutions develop a life and ethic of their own beyond what any individual might have conceived for them. But this does not free the individual from his responsibility to separate himself from

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[1]Ibid., p. xvii. [2]Ibid. [3]See p. 16, above.

that institution if his imaginative impulse toward right action is in conflict with it. This is when he is exercising his creative consciousness.

2

"Shaping the Ring"

If you can assume that there is a truth; if you can assume that there is a goal; if you realize psychologically that being educated to truth provides personal and spiritual fulfillment; if you can assume these things because of your will-to-believe, of your faith in the possibility, then you are faced with "Life's business." You are faced with "just the terrible choice."

Once you have made that choice--regardless of which one it is--you must find the means of achieving that end to which you have committed yourself. Instinct is not enough. You must find the means of proving through action what your instincts tell you, or they are no good to you. Thus the instinct itself becomes part of the process by which it is put into action. That is to say, the instinct, the impulse to right action, must find a bridge whereby it can cross over to reality. That bridge is what we have described as "creative consciousness." Right action, contrary to what Professor Johnson has said, is not the direct result of one's intuition. The instinct itself becomes formalized--an entity in itself--only if it passes through the complex and deep-seated imagina-

tive process of the creative consciousness.

Browning believed that the means lay in what is primarily an artistic phenomenon. For art may "tell a truth obliquely"--and must, since truth cannot be told directly. One must learn, through art, to create a reality which is based on facts, but which is ultimately beyond the facts. "Art is the one way possible," Browning maintains; otherwise, truth is indistinguishable from falsehood. We all possess this creative potential, he would argue. In this thesis, that potential has been referred to as the principle of the creative consciousness. It is a deep and complex imaginative process, attempting to re-order one's experience by exercising one's artistic, creative abilities.

How can one separate himself from the institutional machinery that is supposed to be the seat of authority for society's ethics and laws? Only by exercising one's complicated imaginative processes, only by putting one's unerringly right instincts into action in the face of a society where the facts are never all in, where the evidence is never complete.

Caponsacchi and Pompilia have the right instinct. At first they depend upon the institutional ethic to provide their solution for them. But this ethic is at odds with their right instincts and they are required to find a way of proving their instincts through action. Each does it according to his deep-seated imaginative ability. Caponsacchi

concretizes his instinct about Pompilia through painting a picture of her as the donna angelicata. The symbols of heaven and self-sacrificing love which he employs in his painting of Pompilia give him the inspiration to act. Pompilia's instincts become a reality when she imaginatively creates a marriage in heaven between herself and Caponsacchi. When she feels the first stirrings of life inside her she knows she must find a way of directing these instincts--of turning her capabilities into abilities, of defiantly asserting her right instincts in the face of a society where the institutional machinery is corrupted by the "torpor or assurance." Once she creates her marriage in heaven, she is able to direct her instincts to action.

Caponsacchi and Pompilia feel the need to fulfill themselves by expressing their instincts through an imaginative process which leads to right action. Self-realization is thus one of the goals in Browning's poem. But so, too, is the passion for devotion. Caponsacchi realizes his own true self through the painting of a window-picture. But the controlling symbol in his picture is the "bending down" which Pompilia does in order to sacrifice herself for suffering humanity. Thus he sees the antagonistic but interdependent relationship between self-realization and self-sacrifice. He sees that if the symbols of his picture are not to become too rigid or fixed, he must accept the bending down, the reaching out towards other souls in order to help fulfill himself.

Caponsacchi at first does not see that his reaching out must have a sense of direction. But the artistic framework of his painting symbolically provides him with the controls to manage, direct, and extend his right instincts into right action. In short, Caponsacchi morally orients himself at the same time that he separates himself from the institutional ethic which is presumed to supply this orientation. He provides a basis for his own self-judgment. He no longer need rely on the ambivalent attitudes of his own time. Thus self-realization and the necessity of devotion and self-sacrifice become the end values for Browning, the goal we strive for as we reach beyond our grasp, give "better than our best."

For the reader, such an attitude can be of deep significance. The reader himself can find the same moral orientation toward self-realization. Browning has asked him to contribute his own complex imaginative abilities to the poem, and in this way, the reader reaches out, does his own "bending down," as he attempts to provide a basis for his own self-judgment, as he attempts to extend his own life and living, through his sympathy with the need of others to do the same. In this way, readers help to re-create The Ring and the Book each time they read it. The readers, like the poet, can do the thing "that will breed the thought." They realize themselves as they reach out to help The Ring and the Book realize itself. In this way, like the painter,

they "twice show truth."

This is the way Browning saw it; this is what can be achieved by exercising the principle of the creative consciousness which is within us all.

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